

# Ayurvedic clinic: Eating for summer

Finding perfect balance and health through ayurveda, yoga's sister science.

By Dr. Vijay Murthy



As tempting as they might be, salads, cold soups and ice cream may not be the best choices during the summer months. We live in a world where the effects of day, night and even seasons can seem to go unnoticed on our body due to the convenience of technology that keeps us warm or cools us down, as we desire.

All of this makes it is easy to believe in a lifestyle where the world adjusts to us and we are in control. In reality, it's nearly impossible to control the multitude of effects that seasons have on our complex biology. There is much more to our body chemistry, and our minds, than being able to control the temperature and creating light or darkness with the flick of a switch.

Seasons influence many bodily functions including our hormones and nervous system but perhaps the most important effect is surprisingly on our digestive system. All wisdom traditions, from the West to the East, recommend dietary changes specific to each season. These are often noted with rituals or religious celebrations such as Christmas and Easter. Ayurveda embraces a holistic health model and strongly advises adaptations to one's diet at the change of every season. So, this summer, if you are looking forward to lots of salads and ice cream, you may be inclined to reconsider.

## Seasonal health

But why do seasons have a profound effect on our health? Life on earth is hugely dependent on the distance of our planet from the sun at any given point in time. Just as the sun influences day, night, plant growth, life of all animals and human biology, the distance of the earth from the sun also determines our metabolic capacity. In simple terms, when the earth is closer to the sun, the climatic heat increases and the body's internal heat decreases its ability to maintain balance.

Similarly, when the earth is further away from the sun, as in winter, the environment tends to be cold but the body's internal heat increases. This ability of the body to adjust to climatic changes is controlled by what ayurveda calls '*agni*' which translates approximately to 'metabolism' (among many other meanings).

Although we all have a different metabolic rate dependent on our age, sex, nutritional habits and physical activity, in general, our metabolism tends to slow down during the summer months and accelerate during winter.

Whether this is scientifically true or not is debatable, however, observations over generations have shown that our ability to digest and assimilate is better in winter than in summer. The ayurvedic hypothesis is that when the earth is closer to the sun (as in summer), the body does not need greater heat as the environment provides it naturally. As a result our digestive heat or *agni* becomes slower no matter how different our metabolic rate is as an individual.

#### What to eat

So, knowing this, what is generally good to eat during the warm summer months? Foods that are light and easy to digest, such as cooked vegetables, reduce the stress on the digestive system. It is also best to avoid excessively spicy foods as these can irritate an already slow gut besides adding to the heating effect that is not wanted during summer.

Eat plenty of green and bitter vegetables such as spinach, as these stimulate the liver and actually help speed up the metabolism. Interestingly, these have a cooling effect on the gut thereby alkalising the gut flora, which is of the utmost importance to avoid intestinal infections and parasites.

Foods that are naturally sweet, such as sweet potatoes and whole grains, are also beneficial during the summer. But be aware how refined sweets and artificial sweeteners can dampen metabolism (*agni*) and even trigger toxicity in the gut causing other undesirable problems.

Although it may feel natural to desire cold foods on hotter days, when we understand that the gut tends to lack heat, it is easier to see how by shocking the gut with cold icy foods and drinks this could impair digestion resulting in toxic overload. If you cannot conceive of a summer without salads, cold foods and ice in your drinks, you may wish to consider consulting a qualified ayurvedic practitioner to ensure your body type is suited to this or even to understand your cravings better.

In general, it is good to have lightly steamed vegetables eaten slightly warm to see if this helps with any digestive problems or indeed improves health.

#### Topsy turvy

Whilst this may sound contradictory to normal summer eating, it does have a positive effect on digestion and therefore health. We must remember that if what our mouth, tongue and mind desired determined what is beneficial for our health, we would not have ended up with obesity and diabetes as the biggest health challenges of our times.

Also, remember that excessive consumption of fruit juice may upset the glucose metabolism providing unnecessary calories, so instead, eat seasonal fruits in moderate quantities. Try to use cooling herbs such as coriander, cardamom, cilantro, fennel and fenugreek in cooking and avoid heating spices such as chilies and garlic in excess as well as reducing stimulants and alcohol.

Above all, spend some time outdoors to refill those vitamin D batteries. This is essential for brain and bone health. As ever, where possible, consult a qualified ayurvedic practitioner and plan a simple detoxification programme. Most of all, enjoy your summer. ॐ

*Dr Vijay Murthy is a London-based ayurvedic doctor and a member of the Ayurvedic Practitioners Association (apa.uk.com).*

**Ayu** Sanskrit  
(from *Ayush* meaning lifespan)...

**Definition:**

**Health...Life...**

**Veda** Sanskrit  
(from *vid* meaning to know)...

**Definition:**

**Knowledge...Science...**

**Ayurveda** Sanskrit

- *Science and art of improving quality of life and longevity...*
- *ageless knowledge of health through life...*
- *the oldest complete health system...*

**Definition:**

**THE SCIENCE OF LIFE**



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