



## Review Article

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### A REVIEW ON UPAVASA: THE ANCIENT INDIAN FASTING RITUAL FOR SPIRITUAL AND PHYSICAL WELLBEING

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#### ABSTRACT

Ayurveda is the science of life. It offers advice on how to keep healthy people well and how to treat sick people's problems. Fasting is one of the ten langhana (those that promote lightness of the body) therapies and one of the daivavyapashraya (spiritual) therapies in Ayurveda. Ayurveda also claims that fasting stimulates the digestive system and results in the digestion of ama-dosha (metabolic poisons). Upavasa is a means to come closer to the all-powerful from a spiritual and yogic perspective. Fasting stimulates autophagy, according to scientists. In 2016, Yoshinori Ohsumi, a Japanese cell scientist, won the Nobel Prize in Medicine for his studies on autophagy, a process through which cells recycle and regenerate their contents. Numerous research that has been published suggests that fasting has benefits for neuroprotection and ageing.

**Keywords:** Ayurveda, upavasa, yoga, swastha, fasting

#### INTRODUCTION

Fasting is a practice that many cultures and religions have observed throughout history. It involves voluntarily abstaining from food and/or drink for a specific period. Fasting can be done for various reasons, including spiritual, health, and cultural. One of the most common reasons for fasting is religious or spiritual. Many religions, including Hindu, Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, prescribe fasting to purify the body and mind, strengthen faith, and demonstrate devotion to God. Fasting is also a way to practice self-discipline and self-control, as it requires individuals to resist temptation and abstain from food and drink for a specific period. 'Upavasa' is the Sanskrit term for fasting. Vasa means "to stay," and Upa means "near." Fasting implies "to sit or stay near (the Lord)" to keep the Lord close to your heart and thoughts. Upavasa can be defined as complete abstinence from all four types of food: chewing, licking, swallowing, and drinking.<sup>1</sup>

According to Ayurveda, the body comprises pancha mahabhutha (five elements). The balance of shareerika (Vata, Pitta, Kapha) and manasika (Rajas, Tamas) doshas determines the healthy and unhealthy states.<sup>2</sup> Langhana (depletion treatment) and brahmana (nourishing therapy) are the two therapeutic techniques described. Depletion therapy is any treatment that reduces or depletes bodily virtues and causes lightness in the body. It consists of four elimination therapies (therapeutic emesis, purgation, decoction enema, and nasal inhalation/installation): thirst management, wind exposure, sun exposure, ingestion of digestive stimulants, fasting, and physical exercise.<sup>3</sup> Fasting and starvation are two distinct concepts that are frequently mixed up. The difference between starvation and fasting is that the former refers to the control and restraint of the five sensory and motor

senses. Autophagy is triggered by fasting, which promotes cell renewal and slows down the ageing process.<sup>4</sup>

#### Principle of Upavasa

Upavasa lines with Ayurveda digestion is similar to a fire. You will only put out the fire if you pour too much fuel at once. Fasting is a potent method for igniting the digestive fire, which helps burn off all built-up toxins that have saturated the body and the mind. Because of the ash particles that remain on the fire, the intensity of the flames is diminished, which hinders the burning process. A similar is valid for the human body's vitiated dosha, particularly in the digestive viscera known in Ayurveda as amashaya. This weakens the force and shuts down the digestive fire, producing ama and debilitating stomach effects. Metabolic poisons which are thought to be the primary cause of all diseases. Which ultimately resulted in the blockage of bodily channels, resulting in the development of various diseases. Without nourishment for the viscera, fasting causes many metabolic toxins to be destroyed significantly, igniting the digestive fire and clearing blockages from the channels. This procedure aids in the fight against the disease. The fundamental tenet of fasting is that the body can self-heal and regenerate. When we eat, our body expends energy on food digestion and nutrient absorption. But when we fast, the body turns its attention away from breaking down and absorbing food and towards mending and regenerating tissues. This change enables the body to focus its energy and resources on other crucial procedures like immune system function, cell repair, and detoxification. The idea of autophagy is another fundamental aspect of fasting.<sup>5</sup> The body uses autophagy to degrade and reuse old or damaged cells. The body enters an autophagic state while fasting, where it disassembles cellular components that are no

longer required and reuses those parts to create new cells. This procedure is believed to help prevent age-related illnesses like cancer and Alzheimer's.<sup>6</sup>

The idea of metabolic flexibility is a further tenet of fasting. "Metabolic flexibility" describes the body's capacity to transition between various fuel sources, such as glucose and ketones. The body starts to break down stored fat into ketones, used as a substitute energy source, as soon as it runs out of glycogen during a fast. The body becomes more metabolically flexible due to this process, which could help with weight loss and metabolic health.

### Upavasa in Swasthapurusha

A healthy person can fast for health promotion and prevention purposes. The day's activities in Ayurveda begin with a self-examination of the digestive system; only after the last meal has been digested may one break the fast and then do the remaining dinacharya. A healthy person can benefit from fasting at its best

during Shishira ritu (late winter). Additionally, when recommending fasting, it is essential to consider the time of day, season, unique location characteristics, person's strength, and age.<sup>7</sup> The development of the following diseases appears to be delayed by calorie restriction: autoimmune diseases, atherosclerosis, cardiomyopathies, cancer, diabetes, renal diseases, neurodegenerative diseases, and respiratory diseases.<sup>8,9</sup>

The particular community's culture and religion have an impact on people's health, fast on specific days of the week or year, including Christians, Jews, Buddhists, and Hindus. The month of Ramadan is a time when Muslims observe a strict fast. Some rituals have been added to fasts so that a particular component of health can be taken care of, such as the Santoshi maaka vrata on every Friday, where married women are expected to observe a fast and consume guda (jaggery) and chana (chickpeas). Jaggery contains iron, while chana is a source of protein. These two nutrients are the most frequently deficient in fertile women.

### Prakriti and Fasting

Vata dominant prakriti	Pitta dominant prakriti	Kapha dominant prakriti
Fasting can cause Vata because it accentuates the qualities of light, dry, and cold. You should never fast for longer than two days or conduct water fast if you have a Vata constitution or vata imbalance. At most once every month, think about fasting during the change of the seasons. People in good health and have plenty of energy can break their fast with sweet grape, orange, or mango juice, all Vata-soothing fruits.	A healthy Pitta-dominant person may want to do fasting consisting of diluted grape, gooseberry, pomegranate juice or bitter, astringent vegetable juices produced with leafy greens. Because Pitta people frequently have robust digestion, they should not fast on water alone and shouldn't fast for longer than three days at a time. When the seasons change, it is advantageous for Pitta to fast for a more extended period of three days and to think about fasting once a week the rest of the time.	A healthy, Kapha-dominant person can fast more frequently, up to three days per year, on liquids such as hot water, lemon water, and honey water. Throughout the year, Kapha people should frequently observe a weekly fast on one day.

### Upavasa in Athurapurusha

"Langhanam paramoushadam" is encouraged by Ayurveda. Acharya Sushruta explains fasting about indigestion and illnesses brought on by ama.<sup>10</sup> For disorders of lower severity, it is generally agreed upon that fasting is the preferred course of action. Fasting boosts the body's air and fire components, which in turn dries up the slightly vitiated doshas in a similar way that heat and atmospheric air dry up minor water bodies on the surface of the planet.<sup>11</sup> Fasting is recommended for the treatment of illnesses like fever, conjunctivitis, vomiting, coughing, diarrhoea, herpes, urinary disorders, obesity, diabetes, abscess, splenic disorders, and head and neck issues.<sup>12</sup>

According to some research, fasting may have anti-inflammatory effects since it can lower the body's production of inflammatory markers. Fasting might help lessen inflammation and ease fever symptoms because inflammation is frequently linked to fever.<sup>13</sup> It has been demonstrated that fasting lowers oxidative stress, a form of cellular damage brought on by the build-up of free radicals in the body.<sup>14</sup> Oxidative stress may aggravate some illnesses, such as conjunctivitis, and can contribute to tissue damage and inflammation. Fasting may potentially lessen the severity of conjunctivitis symptoms by lowering oxidative stress. People living with diabetes who fast may see changes in their blood sugar levels. Fasting may result in a spike in blood sugar levels in patients with type 1 diabetes because they cannot produce the hormone that controls glucose. Fasting may initially result in lower blood sugar levels in persons with type 2 diabetes who may also have insulin resistance or reduced insulin secretion, but it may also raise the risk of hypoglycaemia if diabetes

medications are not adjusted appropriately. Individuals with diabetes should closely check their blood sugar levels while fasting, and under the supervision of a healthcare professional, appropriate modifications to diabetic medications, including insulin doses, should be made. The capacity of cells to respond to insulin and absorb glucose from the bloodstream is known to be enhanced by fasting.<sup>15</sup>

Obesity is frequently accompanied by insulin resistance, which raises blood sugar levels and the risk of type 2 diabetes. Fasting may help manage blood sugar levels and lower the chance of developing diabetes in those who are obese by increasing insulin sensitivity.

### Intermittent fasting

Intermittent fasting is a dietary approach that involves alternating between periods of fasting and eating. It is not a specific diet plan but rather a pattern of eating.

The distinctive notion in Ayurveda is called kalavat bhojan. The fundamental component of matter known as kala is in charge of the universe's genesis, maintenance, and demise. dwikalavat bhojana (two times meal) is crucial in maintaining the health of Agni. According to Ashtanga Hridaya, mandagni (low digestive fire) is the root of all illnesses. The lifestyle of today is highly irregular. Therefore, it is crucial to understand kalavat bhojan's function in preventing diseases. For samagni (proper digestive fire) people, dwiklabhojana is advised to maintain a healthy lifestyle and to avoid lifestyle diseases. Dwikala bhojan, a person should eat in the morning and evening, and nothing should be

consumed in between the two meals, according to Acharya Bhavaprakasa.

Intermittent fasting can be done in various ways; however, the following are the most popular: feeding on a time-restricted schedule is keeping the daily meal window to a set time frame, such as eight hours. For instance, you might eat meals between 12 and 8 o'clock and then observe a 16-hour fast afterwards. Alternate-day fasting: This entails a 24-hour fast each other day. You are allowed to eat 500–600 calories of food on days while fasting. In a 5:2 diet, eat normally five days a week while limiting caloric intake to 500–600 calories on the other two days

### Signs and symptoms of proper, adequate Upavasa

According to Vagbhata Ashtanga Hridaya, the advantages of fasting include proper evacuation of faeces, flatus, and urine. A sense of lightness throughout the body, a feeling of purity and freshness in the mouth, throat, and heart, proper belching, the disappearance of exhaustion and tiredness, the appearance of sweat, excessive hunger, thirst, and a need for food, clarity in the senses, improved digestion, enthusiasm, and a reduction in sickness signs and symptoms are all gifts of mental tranquilly.<sup>16</sup>

### Signs of excessive and inadequate Upavasa

Fasting for an extended period leads to cracking pain in the joints, coughing, dry mouth, anorexia, lack of appetite, excessive thirst and belching, hearing and vision impairment, loss of strength, and forgetfulness. Inadequate fasting causes increased Kapha dosha, excessive salivation, frequent expectoration, taste loss, malaise, and frequent urine.

Fasting for an extended period leads to cracking pain in the joints, coughing, dry mouth, anorexia, lack of appetite, excessive thirst and belching, hearing and vision impairment, loss of strength, and lack of memory. Fasting is not advised for people with diseases that are caused by an increased Vata dosha, as well as those who are excessively hungry and thirsty, weak and emaciated, very young, very elderly, or pregnant, or who have extreme levels of rage, jealousy, or other emotions.

### Yoga and Upavasa

Yoga recommended eight layered routes to reach the goal of life, which is emancipation. The second limb is known as *niyama*, which consists of five elements. One of these is *tapas*, defined as deeds practised when carrying out our *swa-dharma* (carrying out our obligations), such as particular duties, responsibilities, and acts of righteousness. Fasting is advised to obtain righteousness. The sheath of food, or *annamayakosha*, is the word for the outermost of the koshas. This is the actual, gross body. *Annamaya kosha* is a physical body matter kept alive by dietary intake. The *annamaya kosha* may get tainted if someone consumes unsuitable meals or prepares irregular and incorrect cuisine. This impairs *agni* and hinders the digestive tract's ability to function. Then, to correct *annamaya kosha*, the person must turn to *upavasa*, *yoga asanas*, and *tatvashuddhi*.<sup>17</sup>

### CONCLUSION

*Upavasa* is described in Ayurveda as the state of being deprived of food for an entire night and the withdrawal from all joys of this world. Fasting is encouraged by science and by many religions for the good of each individual. The body and mind are purified by fasting. It helps you develop self-control and reinforces your belief. Many cultures believe abstinence aids in spiritual purification, which strengthens the will. After reviewing the

numerous Ayurvedic concepts and research studies, we can conclude that *upavasa* is the best option for eliminating toxins and maintaining good health. The goal of Ayurveda is "*swasthasya swasthyarakshanama aturasya vikaraprashamanama cha*," which translates to "to maintain a healthy individual's health and cure a patient's diseases." The goal of Ayurveda can be achieved by *upavasa*.

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