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CONCEPT OF DIET (AHARA) ACCORDING TO AYURVEDIC PERSPECTIVES: A REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Ahara is the most important and basic requirement for living beings. Ahara is considered one of the three upastambhas of life. Various concepts and principles of ahara are described in Ayurveda. Some of the unique concepts like satmya – asatmya, pathya – apathya, ahara vidhi, dwadasha anna pravicharana, ashta ahara vidhi visheshayatana are mentioned for healthy and unhealthy persons. While incorporating the Ayurvedic diet, we must consider the prakriti, agnibala and panchbhautik composition of ahara. Modern life is swift and stressful, and because of that, we have to face lifestyle disorders like diabetes mellitus, hypertension and obesity. Therefore, it is not an exaggeration to state that diet is the most important aspect in treating diseases such as diabetes mellitus and obesity. As Ayurveda gives more importance to ahara and rules of taking food, it prevents and reduces the number of complications in these patients. If we prevent a disease, then the cost of treatment is reduced, leading to the betterment of society and health promotion of individuals. Ahara is important in maintaining the human body's normal physiological and psychological functioning. It provides strength, complexion, nourishment and longevity.

Keywords: Ahara, Ahara Vidhi Vidhan, Ashta Ahara Vidhi Visheshayatana, PathyaApathya, Dwadasha Ashna Pravicharana, Viruddha Ahara.

INTRODUCTION

Food is the most important essential requirement of living beings. Food being accounted as a life-like phenomenon (pranah) is considered one of the three upastambhas of life, meaning life cannot be sustained without food.¹ Acharya Charaka states that anna or food is the best thing sustaining life.²

Ahara is categorized as hitahara (wholesome) and ahitahara (unwholesome). Wholesome and unwholesome food is responsible for happiness and misery respectively. Thus, the body, as well as diseases, are formed by food.³ Ahara is essentially a panchbhoutik entity and can be related accordingly to the theories of Triguna and Tridosha.

Panchbhoutik and Trigunaahara

All food articles comprise five basic elements/ Panchamahabhutas: Akasha, Vayu, Teja, Jala, and Prithvi. The three doshas, Vata-Pitta-Kapha are biological derivatives of the five Mahabhutas and the Trigunas are the qualities responsible for creating the material world, including food.

The following table approximately depicts the relationships:

Table 1: Relation between Panchamahabhuta with Triguna and Tridosha

Sattva	Akasha Vayu	Vata
Rajas	Teja Jala	Pitta
Tamas	Prithvi	Kapha

A lot of importance is given to ahara in Indian literature. Chandogya Upanishad states that the purity of food helps purify the inner self and, hence, the mind and intellect.⁴

As per Ayurveda, there are six types of rasa viz; madhura – sweet, amla – sour, lawana – salty, katu – pungent, tikta – bitter and kashaya – astringent.⁵ Acharya Sushruta clarifies that different combinations of Mahabhutas lead to formation of these shadrasa.⁶ If these shadrasa are taken in quantity i.e. not in excess or in less quantity then we can maintain our health.⁷ A balanced diet in Ayurveda is planned in relation to the known Panchabhautik composition and tridoshic impacts on the living body.

Table 2: The interrelation between Rasa and Mahabhuta

Shadrasa	Panchabhautik Composition	Biological Impact		
		Kapha	Pitta	Vata
Madhura	Jala + Prithvi	↑↑	↓↓	↓
Amla	Prithvi + Agni	↑↑	↑↑	↓
Lavana	Agni + Jala	↑↑	↑↑	↓
Katu	Vayu + Agni	↓	↓	↑↑
Tikta	Akasha + Vayu	↓	↑↑	↑
Kashaya	Vayu + Prithvi	↓↓	↓	↑

Importance of Ahara Rasa

Acharya Charaka explains the concept of satmya, which means suitability to something. Using all the rasas strengthens our body, which is a prawar type of satmya. Using one rasa leads to daurbalya, an awar type of satmya, and the madhya type of satmya is between the prawar and awar type of satmya.⁸ Administration of shadrasa is responsible for an equilibrium of doshas and dhatus.

Classification of Ahara according to different Acharyas in Various views

Acharya Charaka gives the classification of ahara in six different ways that are aharatwa (eatable), yonibhed (origin), prabhava (effect), upayoga (use), rasa (taste), gunabheda (physical properties).

Table 3: Classification of Ahara according to Charaka Acharya⁹

Basis of Classification	Types	Names
Aharatwa	1	Ahara
Yoni bhed	2	Sthavara, Jangama
Prabhava	2	Hitam (Wholesome), Ahitam (Unwholesome)
Upayoga	4	Pana, Ashana, Bhakshya, Lehya
Rasa	6	Madhura, Amla, Lavana, Katu, Tikta, Kashaya
Guna bheda	20	Guru (Heavy), Laghu (Light), Manda (Slow), Tikshna (Sharp), Sheeta (Cold), Ushna (Hot), Snigdha (Oily), Shushka (Dry), Picchila (Slimy), Ruksha (Rough), Ghana (Dense), Drava (Liquid), Mridu (Soft), Kathin (Hard), Sthira (Stable), Chala (Mobile), Sukshma (Subtle), Sthula (Gross), Shlakshna (Clear), Avila (Cloudy)

Gunas / Physical Properties and their Attributes

Acharya Charaka classified ahardravys into twenty types depending upon their twenty properties. The following twenty gunas form the basis of transforming the Panchabhautik matter

into living biological factors in a living being. The theory of samanya and vishesh states that these physical properties, as found in food, produce effects on the body that are similar to those when administered and deplete the opposite properties.

Table 4: Classification of Ahardravya according to another Granthakara¹⁰⁻¹³

Name of Granthakara	Types
Acharya Sharangdhara, Bhavprakash	Chushya, Peya, Lehya, Bhojya, Bhakshya, Charvya
Acharya Kashyapa	Akasheya, Vayaveya, Agneya, Apya and Parthiva
Bhagavad Gita	Satvika, Rajasika, Tamasika

Acharya Charaka explains that rasa, vipaka, and the karma of the various dravyas are classified into 12 groups.

Table 5: Classification of Ahara Varga according to Acharya Charaka¹⁴

Ahara Varga	Description
Shukdhanya Varga (Class of cereals)	It contains different varieties of rice. Example – Raktshali
Shamidhanya Varga (Class of legumes and pulses)	It includes pulses like Moong, Masha, Kulatha, Tila, Peas etc.
Mansa Varga (Classes of Fleshes)	Anupa, Jangal, etc.
Shaaka Varga (Class of Vegetables)	It includes vegetables like Vastuka (bathua), Bathua, Patha etc.
Phala Varga (Class of Fruits)	It contains different fruits like Draksha (grapes), Khajur (Dates), Narikela, Mango, Jamuna, Bibhitaka, Anara, Almond etc.
Harita Varga (Class of green leafy vegetables and tubes)	It contains different leafy vegetables like Moolaka (reddish), Tulsi, Yavani, Saunfa, Coriander, etc.
Maddya Varga (Class of Wines)	Different varieties of wines, including Sura, Madira, Arishta, Sheedhu, etc.
Jala Varga (Class of Water)	Water is divided into three categories depending upon sources of water as 1. Endra- rain drops. 2. Kaar- ice stone during rains 3. Hima- ice
Gorasa Varga (Class of Milk and Milk Products)	Includes 8 different types of milk.
Ikshuvikara Varga (Class of Sugarcane and its products)	It contains sugarcane and various products like Jaggery, Matsyandika, Khanda, and sugar. Acharya Charaka mentioned its four varieties- Makshika, Bhramara, Chhauhra and Pautika
Kritanna Varga (Class of Cooked Food)	This class contains different types of cooked food like Manda, Peya, Vilepi, Yusha, and Yuvagu, which are used in Sansarjan Karma.
Ahara Upayogi Varga (Class of food adjuvants)	This class contains different types of oils, useful dietary supplements like Pippali, Shunthi, various salts, etc.

Discipline of Eating

Ashta Ahara Vidhi Visheshayatana

The ultimate impact of food depends not only on its material qualities but mainly on its processing, i.e., cooking and the discipline of eating. The foremost Ayurvedic classic, Charaka

Samhita, describes the eight principles of ahara vidhi¹⁵; these are:

Prakriti (Natural Quality of Ahariyadrayva)

Natural qualities are innate properties of substances. If the natural property of substances is used as a diet or drug, e.g., heaviness, etc., heaviness is the nature of black gram and pork and lightness

of green gram.

Karan (Preparation)

Preparation is the process performed to modify the natural properties of substances, and that which modifies radically the properties of substances is transformation. For example, the property of rice is heaviness. This property is lost by washing with water and cooking, and rice acquires the property of lightness. Curd causes Kapha, but after churning, buttermilk destroys Kapha.

Samyog (Combination)

Combination is the combining of two or more substances. This combination exhibits unique properties that none of the constituents ever possessed separately, e.g., The combination of honey and ghee. Honey and ghee taken alone are wholesome to the body, but combined in equal quantities, they become toxic.

Rashi (Quantity)

The quantity is of 2 varieties.

Sarvagrah – Total measurement of the entire whole, i.e., the combined quantity of the rice, meat, pulse, condiments, etc.

Parigraha- Detailed measurements of each article of diet separately. This describes the effects of the right and wrong doses.

Desha (Habitat and Climate)

Substances grown in the Himalayas region are heavy in property, while those grown in desert or sandy regions are light. Similarly, the living beings who consume light food articles live in desert regions or indulge in many activities are also light.

Deshasatmya has qualities that are opposite to those of the region. Substances with the qualities of ushna, rooksha, etc., are homologous to the watery or marshy region and the qualities of shweta, snigdha etc., for the desert or sandy region.

Kala (Temporal factor)

Time is used in two senses: time in the general sense, i.e., nityaga and time in the sense of stage, i.e., avasthika. In a general sense, time is used in relation to seasonal wholesomeness. The stage is used in relation to disease.

Upayoga Sanstha (Rules of use)

The diet procedure consists of the dietic rules. The strength of digestion determines them.

Upayokta (The user)

The user is the one who makes use of food.

These eight different factors give rise to good and evil effects and are helpful to one another. These 8 factors have to be considered before taking food. Acharya Vagbhata described sapta ahar kalpana. Upayokta is not considered separately by Ashtanga Samgraha. He explains this under upayoga vyavastha.¹⁶

AHAR VIDHI VIDHAN

In Vimansthana, Charaka Acharya explains that aharavidhidvidhan is the rule for taking food. These principles are described in Ayurveda and apply to every kala¹⁷. These are the rules for taking food for diseased as well as healthy people:

- Hot Unctuous in due measure
- After complete digestion of the previous meal
- Non-antagonist in potency
- In the congenial place
- Provided with all the favourite accessories Neither too hurriedly nor too leisurely Without talking or laughing with total concentration
- Having proper regard for oneself

Similarly, Acharya Sushruta describes 12-fold contemplations to be followed while eating food and termed them dwadasha ashan pravicharana.

Table 6: Dwadasha Ashan Pravicharana¹⁸

Type of Anna	Indication
Sheet Ahara	Thirsty, alcoholic, burning, Raktapitta and emaciated individuals
Ushna Ahara	Kaphaja and Vataja disorders and after Virechan and Snehan (olation therapy)
Snigdha Ahara	Ruksha individuals and individuals with Vata prakriti in vataja disorders
Ruksha Ahara	Obese, people with diabetes and individuals with excess Kapha
Drava Ahara	Dehydrated and weak individuals
Shushka Ahara	Skin disorders, erysipelas and diabetes mellitus.
Ek Kalika Ahara	Individuals with mand Agni (digestive power)
DwiKalika Ahara	Proper Agni
Aushadha Yukt Ahara	Patients who are unable to take unpalatable drugs.
Matraheen Ahara	Individuals with impaired Agni and disease
Prashamaka Ahara	Advised according to seasonal variation
Vruttyartha Ahara	Advised in healthy individuals

Ahar Kal / Diet Time

With all of the above factors related to ahara, ahar kal is among the most important because other factors like aharamatra Agni depend upon ahar kal. According to Ashtanga Hridaya, food should be consumed when we are hungry. At a young age, the diet should be taken at noon, i.e., once a day, but Yogaratnakar suggests dwi kal bhojan, i.e., healthy individuals should eat in the morning and the evening. Vrinda Madhav indicates that if we are hungry, we can eat food at midnight because hunger is an adharniyavega (non-suppressible urge). Even though there are differences in ahara kal, we should consume ahara in the presence of signs of proper digestion, such as clear belching, evacuation of the bowel, lightness in the body, hunger and thirst.

If we take the proper diet at the appropriate time, then an individual remains disease-free and healthy. Thus, Acharya Charaka emphasizes the importance of proper food intake to maintain good health.

In classics, aharamatra also explains in detail. The quantity of food depends upon Agnibala (power of Agni - digestive fire). Samagni food is digested in 4 yama (12 hours), and Tikshnagni food is digested early. So, a heavy diet should be taken in 1/3rd or 1/2 part of stomach capacity.

Light meals should not be eaten on a full stomach. 1/2 stomach should be filled with food articles, 1/4 with water and 1/4 remains for gaseous exchange. Ashtanga Samgraha describes the relation between water and food as drinking water before meals leads to agnimandhya. Drinking water just after a meal increases obesity,

and if it is drunk in small quantities, dhatu samyata is achieved. For proper digestion, food articles with madhur rasa should be eaten first. Food articles with amla and lavana rasa were administered at mid, and katu, tikta, and kashaya rasa pradhan should be eaten at the end. This ahar karma is also explained in Samhita.

Types of Imbalanced Diet / Visham Bhojan

A diet which is irregular and against the rules can cause different types of disease. In classic texts, it is termed as visham bhojan.

Table 7: Types of Visham Bhojan

Visham Bhojan	Description
Adhyashan	Meal taken immediately after first meal
Vishmashan	Food is eaten in small or large quantities at odd times.
Samshan	Eating together of pathya and apathya food articles
Anashan	Fasting is called Anashan
Viruddhashan	Incompatible diet

Incompatible Diet (Viruddha Ahara)¹⁹

Ayurveda also describes some dietary incompatibilities (viruddha ahar) that all individuals should avoid. Dietary incompatibility is of eighteen types.

- Desha Viruddha - Contrary to Climate
- Kala Viruddha - Contrary to the season
- Agni Viruddha - Contrary to digestive power
- Matra Viruddha - Contrary to the measure
- Satmya Viruddha - Contrary to adaptability
- Dosh Viruddha - Contrary to body humors
- Sanskara Viruddha- Contrary to processing
- Virya Viruddha - Contrary to potency
- Koshtha Viruddha - Contrary to bowel habits
- Avastha Viruddha - Contrary to the patient's state
- Krama Viruddha - Contrary to order of eating
- Parihara Viruddha - Contrary to restrictions
- Upchara Viruddha - Contrary to observances
- Paka Viruddha - Contrary to Cooking
- Samyoga Viruddha - Contrary to combination
- Hridaya Viruddha - Contrary to palatability
- Sampata Viruddha - Contrary to rich quality
- Vidhi Viruddha - Contrary to mealtime rules

In addition to these factors of dietetic incompatibility, Acharya Charaka describes six important factors in determining the qualitative acceptability of an article of food irrespective of its material composition. These factors determine the pathya-apathya (do or don't eat) nature of food, as mentioned below,

- Matra - measure
- Kala - time
- Kriya - mode of operation
- Bhumi - habitat
- Deha - body constitution
- Dosha - morbidity factors

Example

Intake of milk and fish together - veerya viruddha (opposite potency), milk and fish together lead to vitiation of rakta (blood) and strotrodha (obstruction of body channels) and formation of ama. Ama is the culprit in the manifestation of a wide range of disorders. Both milk and fish are rich protein sources, and the combination may generate a new type of protein molecule that may exhibit molecular mimicry and generate autoimmunity.

Concept of Pathya - Apathya

The pathya is defined as the food substances which are not harmful to the body channels and please the mind and those with the opposite property are apathya.²⁰ The word pathya derives its origin from the root word pathya, which means a way or channel in Shabdikalpadrumam; it is said that pathya is beneficial for patients while apathya harms them.

The food characteristics and properties will change according to season, place and person; hence pathya also varies. Acharya Charaka has used pathya as a synonym for the chikitsa.

Sharangdhara explains some pathya kalpana like manda, peya, vilepi, yavagu etc. It helps to maintain proper Agni (digestive fire) to digest food properly and give needed nutrition to body tissues. It will also help to avoid fermentation of ama, which is often triggered when Agni becomes low.

In Yogaratnakara, it is said that for treating diseases, aetiology, drug treatment, and pathya are three important factors which should be studied thoroughly before starting the treatment.

Bhela Samhita also explains about merits of pathya and the demerits of apathya in sutrasthana.²¹ Pathya ahara nourishes all dhatus and strotasa, leading to complete body nutrition. Contrary to this, ahara helps in the vitiation of vata, etc. Hence, for the maintenance of health and treatment of diseases, pratyahara should be consumed.

According to Bhavaprakasa, taking ginger and salt before food enhances Agni and taste clears the tongue and throat. Charaka and Vagbhata also describe some regularly consumed food articles: raktshali, mudga, antariksha jala, saidhava, jivanti, meat of ainamruga, godha, rohitmatsya, cow's ghee, cow's milk, tilataila, ginger, grapes, pomegranates and sugar are considered as most conductive among food articles.²²

These pathyaahara are described as specific to a particular disease condition, and some pathya mentioned above can be followed regularly for healthy individuals irrespective of disease condition.

DISCUSSION

Ayurveda focuses on maintaining a healthy state of human body and mind. Ahara is responsible for purushutpati and is also needed to continue life. Various concepts of ahara are described in Ayurvedic classics. Acharya Charaka, Sushruta, Vagbhata and other Granthakara described Ahara in their way. Acharya Charaka explained ashto ahara vidhi visheshayatana ahara vidhi vidhan in detail. These rules are to be followed while taking the food. It is both for the healthy and unhealthy person, but Acharya Sushruta described dwadasha ahara pravichana for unhealthy person. Acharya Charaka also explained some dietary incompatibility that should be avoided by all individuals for the maintenance of health. However, such incompatible food routinely disturbs the balance of essential elements and can cause various diseases.

Dietetics in today's context holds importance because many new food products, junk foods, fad diets, etc., are being introduced daily. The changing lifestyles and fast pace of modern life leave

little time for individuals to assess their dietary needs and requirements. Television food commercials, ready-to-eat food and home deliveries of food items influence people's eating habits. According to Ayurveda, this behaviour can be classified as pradnyaparadha.

Modern life is speedy and stressful, and because of that, we have to face lifestyle disorders like diabetes mellitus, hypertension and obesity. Therefore, it is not an exaggeration to state that diet is the most important aspect in treating diseases such as diabetes mellitus and obesity. As Ayurveda gives more importance to ahara and rules of taking food, it prevents and reduces the number of complications in these patients. If we prevent a disease, then the cost of treatment is reduced, leading to the betterment of society. Ahara is important in maintaining the human body's normal physiological and psychological functioning. It provides strength, complexion, nourishment and longevity.

For a healthy and fit body, ahara, nidra (sleep), and brahmacharya are three pillars of healthy living, as per Ayurveda. Modern science describes ahara in terms of calories and the nutritional value of its components. Ayurveda described ahara in terms of pathya-apathya, hitaahita, viruddhaahar, nityasevaniyadravya, bhojan krama and sequence of eating food as per rasas (tastes) for healthy living. Such Ayurveda advocacies should be followed for improvement in nutrition quality of life.²³

Ayurvedic principles of dietetics can also be correlated with nutraceuticals in the present era.²⁴ Nutraceuticals are any food material that is used for the improvement of health and prevention of disease. Ayurvedic diet acts as Rasayana by preventing degenerative changes caused by ageing. Ahara rasayana, pathya-apathya, and hita-ahitahara are similar to current nutraceutical practices because they fulfil the body's nutritional requirements and increase immunity and body strength. It is the holistic and individualistic approach.

CONCLUSION

Food is the most important and basic requirement for survival. It is important to pay attention to our diet. It is important to follow these guidelines to manage your health better. Suppose we start eating according to Ayurvedic guidelines and give our body what it requires through nutrition. Ayurvedic ahara focuses on promoting good health through nutrition and the primary prevention of lifestyle disorders in the population. It strives to improve or maintain the optimum nutritional health of the individuals that make up the community. It emphasizes health promotion and disease prevention but may include therapeutic and rehabilitation services.

Ayurvedic ahara can significantly contribute to all the programmes of lifestyle disorders because Ayurveda promotes health as a valued community asset.

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