



Review Article

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CONCEPTUAL INSIGHTS OF AHARA (DIET) IN AYURVEDA: A NARRATIVE REVIEW

Abhishek Thorba Kadam¹, Vaishnavi Anandrao Deshmukh¹, Vinayak Nilkanth Joshi^{2*}, Prakash Mukund Mane³

¹ PG Scholar, Department of Roganidana Vikritivijnana, Dr. D. Y. Patil College of Ayurveda, Hospital and Research Centre, Pimpri, Pune, Maharashtra, India, Dr. D. Y. Patil Vidyapeeth (Deemed to be University)

² HOD and Professor, Department of Roganidana Vikritivijnana, Dr. D. Y. Patil College of Ayurveda, Hospital and Research Centre, Pimpri, Pune, Maharashtra, India, Dr. D. Y. Patil Vidyapeeth (Deemed to be University)

³ Professor, Department of Roganidana Vikritivijnana, Dr. D. Y. Patil College of Ayurveda, Hospital and Research Centre, Pimpri, Pune, Maharashtra, India, Dr. D. Y. Patil Vidyapeeth (Deemed to be University)

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*Corresponding author

E-mail: vinayak.joshi@dpu.edu.in

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ABSTRACT

World Health Organization (WHO) explains about unhealthy food and malnutrition as a third major cause of death worldwide. Classical texts also mention eating Ahitkar ahara (unwholesome diet) as a cause of various health disorders. On the other hand, concept of Hitkar ahara (wholesome diet), its quality, quantity, daily and seasonal regimens and forbidden dietary practices (Ninditashana) gives a broad idea to maintain health. This study aims to explore conceptual understanding of Ahara from ancient Samhita and modern science. A thorough literature study from Brihatrayi and online databases as Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed and Ayush research articles were done. The review is a careful compilation of above data to analyse importance, classification of Ahara and its role in maintaining health and life. Ahara is defined as sustainer of life. It is not merely intake of food but also include type, quality, quantity, timing and digestive capacity as a consideration of individual approach and Ninditashana (forbidden dietary practices) as a cause of various diseases. Ancient dietary principles align with modern nutritional science offering personalised and preventive approach. Holistic approach to dietary practices helps in maintaining health, body-mind balance, immunity, physical, mental as well as spiritual strength and longevity of life.

Keywords: Ahara, Ahara Matra, Ninditashana, Rasa Sevan Krama, Saliva, Trayopastambha.

INTRODUCTION

According to Acharya Charaka, Hitkar ahara (wholesome diet) sevan is the key to living a healthy life. On the contrary, Ahitkar ahara (unwholesome diet) sevan leads to various diseases.¹ Ayurveda explains the concept of Hitkar ahara (wholesome diet) and Ahitkar ahara (unwholesome diet) and mentions about Vikarprashamanam (cure of diseased) and Swasthasya Swasthya Rakshanam... (maintaining health) as provision.

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines health as "a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity".² This definition emphasizes that health is more than just the absence of illness; it's a holistic concept encompassing various aspects of an individual's life. Unhealthy diet, unsafe food and malnutrition in all its form accounts for about one third of all deaths globally. Ayurveda not only science of ancient medicine but a holistic way of life, to make it healthier and balanced in all aspects of a disease-free living.

Ahara (diet) is responsible for Ayu (life), Bala (strength), Varna (complexion) and Vyadhikshamatva (immunity).³ As an ancient science of health and healing, ayurveda puts Ahara (diet) at utmost importance. Ahara (diet) is not merely intake of food but intricately linked to physical, mental and spiritual well-being of an individual. the verse from Taittiriya Upanishad (Annamaya Kosha), 'Annam Brahma ' It conveys the idea that food is a manifestation of the Divine-the source, sustainer, and nourisher of life.

In the ongoing era, the changes in daily lifestyle, disturbed eating habits and sleeping patterns, lack of physical activity contributing to most of metabolic disorders and hormonal changes in living beings. The paper aims to study importance of food in maintaining health and concept of Ahara (diet) as medicine. Primary objective is to go through Brihatrayi exploring concept of Ahara (diet), its classification, role in day-to-day life.

This is literature based descriptive review paper, compiling classical ayurvedic texts with modern scientific literature to explore and analyse the concept of Ahara (diet) and its role in maintaining health and preventing disease. Primary ayurvedic texts were reviewed to understand the foundational concepts of Ahara (diet) Charaka Samhita, Sushruta Samhita and Ashtangasangraha along with ayurvedic writings, and web search.

The term Ahara (diet) is originated from 'hr' meaning to sustain or to carry. Ahara (diet) is what sustains life. This signifies that 'we become what we eat'. Ahara (diet) is not merely food intake, but a holistic term encompassing its type, quality, quantity, timing, method of preparation, and digestive capacity of the consumer.⁴

Trayopastambha (3 Sub-Pillars of Life)

Ahara: Acharya Charaka elaborates about three sub-pillars of life-Ahara (diet), Nidra (sleep) and Brahmacharya (celibacy). Ahara (diet) is first and most important pillar out of three. The Greek Physician and Philosopher Hippocrates says, 'Let food be your medicine and medicine be your food'. Shabdakalpadruma

states that the subject which can be swallowed through throat is called Ahara (diet). Continuing to this, commentary of Acharya Chakrapani states that Ahara (diet) is nothing but the thing which is swallowed and thus it includes both food and drugs.⁵

Classification of Ahara (Diet)

Acharya Sushruta states about Chaturvidha Ahara as follows:

Table 1: Classification of Ahara (diet) According to Acharya Sushruta⁶

Shita	Swallowed or soft food items which can be gulped as khichadi.
Pita	Drinkables, food items such as juices, buttermilk, etc. which are in liquid form
Lidha	Likable, semisolid food items as paste, jam, jellies, etc which are licked and consumed
Khadita	Chewable foods such as dry fruits, chapati, etc.

Acharya Sharangdhara has mentioned Ahara bheda as Bhojya, Bhakshya and Charvya are chewable, Lehya are likable, Choshya which are slowly sucked e.g. candies, lollipops etc. and Peya are drinkable.⁷ The classical texts mention about three characteristics of mind (Trigunatmak mana)-Satva, Raja and Tama which are brought up and supported by food we take.

On the basis of various parameters as Rasa (taste), Virya (potency), Vipaka (bio-transformed rasa), Prabhava (specific action), Guna (properties), Ahara (diet) can also be classified as follows :

Table 2: Classification of Ahara (diet) According to Various Parameters⁸

Basis	Type
Rasa (taste)	Madhura (sweet), Amla (sour), Lavana (salty), Katu (pungent), Tikta (bitter), Kashaya (astringent)
Virya (potency)	Sheeta (cold) and Ushna (hot)
Vipaka (bio-transformed rasa)	Madhura (sweet), Amla (sour), Katu (pungent)
Prabhav (specific action)	Guduchi (<i>Tinospora cordifolia</i>) as antipyretic
Guna (properties)	Guru (heavy) and Laghu (light)

Food and Mind

Karma yoga Adhyaya from Bhagwat Gita says that all living thing originates from Ahara (diet). Sacrifice is a source of action and rainfall; rainfall is the source of Ahara (diet).

Satvik Ahara: The term Satva belongs to spiritual quality. Satvik food includes fresh fruits, milk, honey, sprouts, veggies, whole grains, nuts, seeds, legumes and herbal teas. The food which does not disturb the digestive fire. These foods help in maintaining balance in mental health, reduces symptoms of anxiety, sadness, mood disorders, hyperacidity and encourages stress free living.⁹

Rajasik Ahara: Raja is an attribute of passion and fury. The food which causes grief, anger and sour, bitter, salty in taste are rajasik. They disturb body-mind balance and cause agitation and are suggested for people who are boring and indolent.⁹

Tamasik Ahara: Tama is characterised by apathy, lethargy or dullness. It includes foods like fried, frozen, packaged, processed, stale items , meat, etc. This are suggested to be avoided as it upsets body and mind, increase rage and criminal tendency and hinders social progress.⁹

Concept of Ahara Matra

Everything happening with body health or disease is due to Ahara (diet), choosing food wisely is the main concern towards healthy living.¹⁰ An American polymath – Benjamin Franklin says ‘Your diet is a bank account. Good food choices are good investments.’ This also implies that not only quality but quantity of food is also important. Proper quantity of food ensures digestion, absorption and assimilation of food. Both excessive and insufficient quantity may lead to digestive imbalance causing various diseases.

The term Matra is derived from ‘Ma’ means to measure. Matra refers to appropriate quantity of food or medicine should be taken according to individual Jatharagnibala (strength of digestive fire).¹¹ Therefore, Matra is not a fixed measurement but a lively and unique idea. When food is consumed in right quantity it does not disturb Prakriti (constitution), helps to build up Bala (strength), Varna (complexion), Sukha (health) and Ayushya (longevity of life).¹²

Ideally stomach is divided in four parts out of which half of the stomach should be filled with solid food, one fourth by liquid and remaining one fourth should be empty for circulation of Vata and digestive juices.¹³ Following the rule aids in proper digestion of food, maintains strength of digestive fire, balancing doshas and provides adequate nutrition to all Dhatus (Body tissue). Acharya Charaka suggests to observe feeling of Laghuta (lightness) and Guruta (heaviness) in abdomen suggesting complete digestion.

Factors Determining Ahara Matra

Agnibala (Digestive strength) : It differs from person to person. Tikshna agni (strong digestive fire) is able to digest all types of food easily while Manda agni (weak digestive fire) has lesser ability to digest even small quantity of food.⁴

Vaya (Age) : Classical texts define concept of Vayavibhajana (age wise differentiation of life span). Ideally human life span is divided in four stages as Balyawastha (childhood), Tarunyawastha (adolescence), Madhyamawastha (adulthood) and Vridhawastha (senescence).¹⁴ Based on this quantity of food requirement changes as children and elderly require lesser quantity of food while youth require moderate to high quantity.

Desa (Habitat) : It is of two types Sharir-desa and Bahya-desa. In Bahya-desa, Jangala desha have more Snigdha, Guru i.e. nourishing diet than Anup desha.¹⁵

Vyaktibheda (Personalized approach) : As Agnibala (digestive strength) differs from person to person, quantity of food required also changes based on individual Prakriti (constitution), disease status (e.g. Langhana or Laghu ahara in nav-jwar) and daily routine.⁴

Kala (Time and Season) : Classical texts determine Aharaja (dietary) and Viharaja (behavioural) regimens as Dincharya (daily regimen) and Ritucharya (seasonal regimen) leads to healthy life style. For e.g. In Hemant ritu (winter) Agnibala (digestive strength) is more so it can digest heavy quantities of food easily. On the contrary, in Varsha Ritu (rainy season) strength of digestive fire is naturally weakened so less quantity, easily digestible food is advised.¹⁶

Principle of Rasa Sevan Krama (Methodological Order of Taste Consumption)

While initiating meal the strength of digestive fire is able to digest heavy nutritious food. Shadrasatmaka Ahara is classified of food on basis of Rasa (taste) and Guna (properties). Classical texts mention which rasa and guna should be taken at beginning-middle-end of meal. Initiating meal with Guru (heavy), Snigdha

(unctuous), Madhura (sweet) ahara dravya which are heavy and highly nutritious. Mid meal includes Amla (sour), Lavana (salty) ahara dravya which are Tikshna (high potency), Ushna (hot potency) helping in digestion and Katu (pungent), Kashaya (astringent) at end of meal leading to feeling of Tripti (satisfaction).¹⁷

Following this principal of Rasa Sevan aids in smooth digestion and maintaining strength of digestive fire.

Concept of Agni and Kleda

Agni: Agni in literature refers to fire and according ayurveda it is source of transformation and sustaining life. Aacharya Charaka mentions 13 types of Agni i.e. Jatharagni (principal digestive fire)-1, Bhutagni (five elemental digestive fires)-5, and Dhatwagni (metabolic fire operating each body tissue)-7. Jatharagni which is found in Koshta (can be referred as gastrointestinal tract) transforms Ahara into Poshaka bhava and Poshya bhava. Poshak bhava gives nourishment of same Dhatus (body tissue) and Poshya bhava help in Uttarottara Dhatus Poshana (sequential nourishment and transformation of body tissues) and formation.¹⁸ Bhutagni helps to metabolise the basic elemental constitution of food and Dhatwagni governs tissue level assimilation by transforming food nutrients to foundational components for individual dhatu during digestion of food.¹⁹

Kleda: It is Kledaka kapha, type of 5 types of Kapha. It softens and binds food eaten, make it easy to swallow. It disintegrates food and also helps in action of Pachaka pitta which aids in proper digestion of food.²⁰

Concept of Ninditashana

The term Nindita means forbidden, prohibited or advised to avoid and Ashana means Annam, Ahara, food or eatables.²¹ Ninditashana refers to dietary practices that must be avoided to maintain health. As discussed earlier, health is dependent of Ahara matra. Matra is categorised as Samyak and Asamyaka Matra. Asamyaka matra has seven subtypes as 1. Sankeernasana 2. Virudhashanama 3. Amatashana 4. Ajeernashana 5. Samashana 6. Adhyashana and 7. Vishamashana.²²

Table 3: Classification of Improper Eating Behaviours (Ninditashana) According to Ayurveda

Samashana ²³	Eating wholesome and unwholesome food together. E.g. cow milk and fish
Adhyashana ²⁴	Consuming food again when earlier food taken is not digested.
Vishamashana ²⁴	Untimely (Akala) intake of food either more (Atimatra) or less (Alpamatra) in quantity.

Importance of Saliva

The digestive tract begins from mouth ending at anus is a complexed structure involving various glands and their secretion. Salivary glands, pancreas and liver provide secretion for digestion and emulsification of food.²⁵

Saliva is serous and mucus secretion from principal salivary glands-parotid, submandibular and sublingual. It contains two major types of protein-

1. Ptyalin (an α amylase)-digest starches.
2. Mucus secretion contains mucin-emulsification and surface protection.

Function : The mouth is loaded with number of pathogenic bacteria that can easily destroy tissues and cause dental caries. Salivary secretion plays exceedingly important role for

maintaining healthy oral tissues. It helps to prevent deteriorative process in several ways-

1. The flow of saliva itself helps to wash away pathogenic bacteria.
2. Saliva contains a proteolytic lysozyme-attacks bacteria and help thiocyanate ions to enter bacterial cells which become bactericidal and digest remnant of food particle which further aids in removal of bacterial metabolic support.

CONCLUSION

The ancient wisdom of Ayurveda regarding dietary practices stands remarkably aligned with contemporary nutritional science. This review demonstrates that diet transcends simple caloric intake-it operates as a therapeutic agent influencing physical health, mental clarity, and emotional stability. The Ayurvedic framework emphasizing individual diet selection, appropriate quantities, and seasonal adjustments challenges the validity of generic dietary guidelines applied uniformly across diverse populations.

The three pillars of life-diet, sleep, and celibacy-recognize that nutrition forms the foundation of human wellbeing. Food functions not merely as hunger settlement but as a growth-promoting and immunity-building substance. The classification of Ahara (diet) through taste, quality, and post-digestive effects provides a practical methodology for matching individual consumption to personal digestive capacity and constitutional type. The teaching that mental wellbeing depends partly on diet choices-through Satvik, Rajasik, and Tamasik categories-finds validation in modern research linking dietary patterns with neurotransmitter production and psychological stability.

Understanding that proper diet sequencing, adequate quantity calibrated to digestive strength, and avoidance of incompatible combinations prevent diseases like diabetes, hypertension, and digestive disturbances offers a preventive medicine approach more sustainable than treating established illness. The integration of Ayurvedic dietary principles with contemporary nutritional science creates a practical framework for preserving health and preventing lifestyle disorders.

Diet selection directly influences physical immunity, digestive efficiency, mental clarity, and emotional regulation. Personalized nutrition accounting for individual digestive capacity, age, season, and constitution prevents disease development more effectively than standardized approaches. Proper eating sequencing and adequate food quantity maintain balanced metabolism and tissue nourishment. Avoiding improper food combinations and untimely consumption patterns eliminates fundamental causes of chronic metabolic disorders.

Future Recommendations

Conducting evidence-based studies comparing Ayurvedic personalized dietary protocols with conventional nutritional counselling in managing obesity, diabetes, and gastrointestinal disorders. Developing accessible certifications enabling clinicians across healthcare disciplines to integrate Ayurvedic dietary assessment into practice. Creating community-based dietary guidance programs rooted in Ayurvedic principles adapted to local foods and seasonal availability. Employing modern laboratory methods to validate Ayurvedic diagnostic and prescriptive dietary approaches, bridging traditional knowledge with contemporary evidence.

The famous American Inventor Thomas A. Edison said that, "The doctor of the future will no longer treat the human frame with drugs, but rather will cure and prevent disease with nutrition" -

Ayurvedic dietary wisdom offers an evidence-informed, culturally respectful pathway toward disease prevention and sustainable health.

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