

REVIEW ON HOLISTIC AYURVEDA APPROACH TO POSHANA (NUTRITION)

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ABSTRACT

Poshana is derived from *Pus Dhatu* and *Ana* meaning to bringing up, to nourishing, supporting, maintaining. *Poshana* is a complete biological process by which a living being utilises *Ahara* to support its life system. It starts with *Ahara paka*, *Dhatupaka*, *Dhatu Poshana*, and the creation of *Sara* and *Kitta*. *Poshana* is increasingly recognised as an essential indicator of development at the national and international levels. Malnutrition in children has emerged as a silent national emergency and accounts for 68% of all infant mortality in India. India also lags on nutritional indicators, with high levels of anaemia in women of reproductive age. The *Poshana* can be classified as 1. *Poshana* for Malnutrition, 2. *Poshana* for obesity, 3. *Poshana* for healthy living, and 4. *Poshana* for diseases. Ayurveda emphasises diversified aspects of dietetics and nutrition: quality, quantity, processing methods, the rationale of a combination of food articles, emotional elements, the nature of the consumer, and geographical and environmental conditions. Holistic Ayurveda science considers three crucial factors when dealing with nutrition: *Aushadha* (drugs & therapies), *Ahara* (food, diet), and *Vihara* (lifestyle practices). Among these, *Ahara* plays an essential role, as recounted by major Ayurvedic literature.

Keywords: Nutrition, Malnutrition, *Dhatu*, *Ahara*, *Vihara*, *Rasayan*.

INTRODUCTION

Nutrition is increasingly recognised as an important indicator of development at national and international levels. It is a vital component of the individual's and community's health as the nutritional well-being of the population is considered an economic asset and a prerequisite for national development^[1]. Every living and non-living being in this universe is composed of five basic elements, the *Pancha Mahabhutas*, namely Earth (*Prithvi*), Water (*Apya*), Fire (*Teja*), Air (*Vayu*) and space (*Akasha*). The *Panchabhuta* components of ingested food nourish their respective tissue elements in the body^[2]. Most health problems develop due to incorrect eating practices and cookery procedures. Ayurveda lays stress on positive health, a blend of physical, mental, social, moral and spiritual welfare and this holistic medical science considers three critical factors while dealing with nutrition, i.e., *Aushadha* (drug & therapies), *Ahara* (diet, food) and *vihara* (practices). *Ahara* and *Vihara*, which are congenial to the channels, constitution, and strength of an individual, are termed *Pathya* (wholesome), and that which is non-congenial is termed *Apathya* (unwholesome). The preventive and curative aspects of Ayurveda revolve around the central theme of *Pathya Ahara* and *Vihara*^[1]. Ayurveda emphasises basic dietary guidelines regarding appropriate food, combinations of food, cooking methods, storage, eating atmosphere, hygiene and etiquette (*Ashtavidha Ahara Vidhi Vishesha Ayatana*)^[2].

Ayurveda portrays the human body as a product of nutrition. Nutrition forms the basis for the etymology of the human body, as indicated in Ayurveda. The Sanskrit synonyms denoting the human body (viz. *Kaya*, *Deha*, *Shareera*) indicate dynamic nutrition and different metabolic aspects of nutrition. For example, 'Kaya' represents growth and development by nutrition, 'Deha' stands for anabolism, and 'Shareera' symbolises catabolism^[1].

The 20th century has seen major shifts in dietary intakes globally, with a marked increase in the consumption of sugars, snack foods, take-away foods and high-energy foods. At the same time, the consumption of nutrients and fibre-dense foods is dimin-

ishing. The very large body of evidence suggests that diet is essential to mental health in the same way as it is to physical health. Feeding the brain with a diet that provides adequate complex carbohydrates, essential fats, amino acids, vitamins, minerals, and water can support healthy neurotransmitter activity. It can protect the brain from the effects of oxidants, which have been shown to affect mood and mental health negatively^[2].

Malnutrition problem in India:

Child and maternal undernutrition are the single largest health risk factor in India, responsible for 15 per cent of India's total disease burden. Malnutrition in children manifests either as 'stunting' (low height in relation to age), 'wasting' (low weight in relation to height), or both. India is home to almost one-third of all the world's stunted children and half the world's wasted children. Poor nutrition in the first 1,000 days after birth leads to stunted growth, leading to an inter-generational cycle of malnutrition. Malnutrition keeps people from reaching their full potential, affecting their health and social and economic development^[3].

India also lags on other nutritional indicators, with high levels of anaemia in women of reproductive age and low prevalence of exclusive breastfeeding of infants during their first six months. Almost 50.4 per cent of women in the 15-49 age group suffer from iron deficiency anaemia, and only 55 per cent of children are exclusively breastfed for six months. Anaemia is a public health problem affecting both children and women in the reproductive age group. It not only leads to increased maternal mortality but also delays physical and mental development. Poor nutrition is the underlying cause of anaemia^[3].

Malnutrition in adults, too, cannot be ignored. Twenty-three per cent of women and 20 per cent of men in the 15-49 age group are underweight, and almost the same proportion—21 per cent of women and 19 per cent of men—are overweight. In 2017, India launched the POSHAN Abhiyaan, a flagship national nutrition mission to improve nutrition among children, pregnant women, and lactating mothers^[3].

Classification of Poshana^[4]:

The Poshana is classified as

1. Poshana for Malnutrition
2. Poshana for obesity
3. Poshana for healthy living
4. Poshana for diseases

METHODS:

Holistic medical science considers three important factors while dealing with nutritional health and disease, i.e., Ahara (diet, food), Vihara (lifestyle practices), and Aushadha (drugs & therapies). Among these, Ahara' is the best of all medicines and is considered one of the three sub-pillars of Ayurveda (Thrayo-Upasthamba), according to major Ayurvedic literature.

Ahara (Diet, Food):

Ayurveda emphasises basic dietary guidelines in terms of appropriate food, food combinations, cooking methods, storage, eating atmosphere, hygiene and etiquette (*Ashtavidha Ahara Vidhi Viseshha Ayatana*). Nutrition refers to food and its relationship with health while dietetics refers to meal planning for the well and sick^[7]. Ayurveda classifies Ahara into 12 basic categories based on source, preparation method and utility such as 1. *Sukandhanya* (corns with bristles) 2. *Shamidhanya* (pulses) 3. *Mamsa* (meat) 4. *Saka* (vegetables) 5. *Phala* (fruits) 6. *Arita* (salads) 7. *Madya* (fermented drinks) 8. *Ambu* (water) 9. *Gorasa* (milk and milk products) 10. *Ikshuvikara* (products of sugarcane) 11. *Krtanna* (food preparations) 12. *Aharayogi* (accessory food articles).

Diet plays an important role in keeping our minds healthy, and the explicit psycho-pharmacological effects of food led to the classification of food into three categories.

1. *Satvik diet*: Ideal diet containing vegetarian, non-oily, and non-spicy articles, which are congenial to the body and mind.
2. *Rajasika diet*: Too spicy, hot, sour, salty excite the mental faculties.
3. *Tamasika diet*: Too oily, heavy food reduces mental competence.

Most health problems are attributed to wrong eating habits and faulty cooking methods. Ayurveda deals

with the *Pathyavyavastha* (planning of diet: dietetics) scientifically and holistically based on certain principles, emphasising certain important aspects. Apart from the elemental constitution of food, Ayurvedic advocacy prescribes six important factors regarding the acceptability of a wholesome diet: *Matra, Kala, Kriya, Bhumi, Deha, and Desha* 1. One should consume food with full eating awareness, i.e., '*Tanmanabhunjita*' (*Charaka Vimana sthana 1/24*). 2. Every country enjoys varied food traditions, as per the region. Hence, one should consider the type of food and quantity according to the habitat for maintaining good health (*Desha Satmya*). 3. One must take wholesome food in the correct quantity and at the right time to maintain the homeostasis of all three biological humours (*Doshas*). 4. Ayurveda strongly regards that eating before or after the usual timings of meals is unhealthy or '*Swasthyavighataka*', which causes physical and mental illness. 5. Shushruta advises the intake of easily digestible, energetic, soft, and warm food to be taken in proper quantity only when one is hungry (*Sushruta Sutra sthana 46 and 47*)^[1,2].

The food and nutritional requirements vary from person to person and depend upon the status of Agni, Sharira Prakriti, age, etc. Susruta and Vagbhata have suggested that if stomach capacity is hypothetically divided into four parts based on its filling, one should take two parts of solid food, 1 part of liquid food, and 1 part should be left empty for easy movement of *Vata*. *Guru, Madhura* and *Snigdha* food should be taken initially during a meal, followed by *Amla* and *Lavana Ahara*. Food, which is *Ruksha, Katu, Tikta, and Kashaya*, should be taken in the last part of the meal for proper activation of Agni, proper absorption, and assimilation. After eating, it is advised to rest for *Muhurta Matra* (48 minutes) for proper digestion^[1].

The food contains six basic tastes viz. *Madhura* (sweet), *Amla* (sour), *Lavana* (salt), *Katu* (pungent), *Tikta* (bitter), and *Kashaya* (astringent) and each taste has predominance of particular elements of *Panchamahabhuta* which exerts a specific effect on bio-humours (*Tridoshas*) and tissue function (*Dhatus*)

(*Ashtanga Hridaya Sutrasthana 10/1*). Each food article either has *dosha* aggravating or pacifying or balancing action on the human body, and Ayurveda prescribes a specific diet to sustain the balance of Tridoshas (Vata, Pitta and Kapha) disturbed due to various factors like season, age, etc. (*Ashtanga Hridaya Sutra 13/6*). Thus, Ayurvedic advocacy always emphasises enjoying all six tastes of food and forbidding excessive use of single tastes leading to illness. Moreover, different tastes also possess specific biological activity influencing physiology and nutritional impact^{[1],[2]}.

Vihara (Lifestyle practices):

Vihara means the activities of daily life according to any person's societal, economic and cultural norms. Ayurvedic classics have described the healthy routines to be followed in the daytime (*Dina Charya*), at Nighttime (*Ratri Charya*) and according to the seasonal variations (*Ritu Charya*) and codes of conduct (*Sadvritha*). The description of *Dinacharya*, *Ritucharya*, *Sadvritha* and *Nidra* in Ayurveda depicts the importance of a healthy regimen in preventing and managing many diseases^[2].

Dinacharya: Ayurveda promotes a *Dinacharya* that is in harmony with nature. It is advisable to wake up during *Brahma Muhurta* (preferably between 4.00 a.m. to 5.30 a.m.). 2. Drinking water early in the morning, according to one's capacity, cleanses the body by enhancing the elimination of toxic waste. 3. Regular exercise is essential for perfect health. It builds up stamina and resistance against disease, clears the channels of the body (Srotas) and increases blood circulation. It enhances the efficiency of body organs, promotes appetite and digestion and prevents obesity.

Ritucharya: In *Ayurvedic* classics, there has been a thorough consideration for seasons besides the dietetic regimens for days and nights. The year is divided into six seasons, and a detailed regimen for these seasons is prescribed. A bitter, hot and astringent diet is advised in the spring, while salty, sour and sweet food should be avoided. Wheat, barley, honey syrup, fruits like mango, jack fruit, etc., and forest animals' meat are advised. In the summer season, due to the

hot climate, Pitta is aggravated. Hence, *Pitta* pacifying cold, liquid, sweet and oily diet is advised. Excessive hot, spicy, sour, and salty diet should be avoided. Intake of rice, milk, ghee, sugar, grapes, coconut water etc is advised. In the rainy season, the aggravation of Vata occurs. Hence, *Vata Shamaka* sweet, sour and salty food and drinks are preferred. The food should be hot, dry, fatty and easily digestible. Preserved rice, wheat, barley and mutton soups are recommended. In pre-winter and winter seasons, *Vata-dosha* is aggravated by the cold, dry, chilly atmosphere; hence, the *Vataghna*, *Pittavardhaka* diet is recommended. Hot, sweet, sour and salty food, milk, sugarcane, rice, oils and fats are advised, and in the autumn season, aggravation of *Pitta dosha* occurs.

Sadvritha: *Ayurveda* prescribes certain rules for maintaining a healthy mind. These principles of right conduct apply to all people at all times and places. Practising them gives balance and harmony to the mind.

Aushadha/ Rasayana (drug & therapies):

Rasayanas are herbs, therapies, or practices that are conducive to and beneficial to body tissues and their functions. Further, the unique *Rasayana* concept *Ayurveda* advocates emphasizes achieving optimum benefits of nutrition, viz. longevity, immunity and mental competence. As illustrated in Figure 1, *Ayurvedic* physiology clearly defines the theories of metabolism and attributes 13 factors (*Agni*- biochemical and genetic factors) responsible for the digestion and metabolism of food. These contributing factors of nutrition dynamics or '*Agni*' act at different levels of the organisation, viz. one *Jataragni* (Transformation at Gastrointestinal Tract level), seven *Dhatwagni* (Transportation, selection at tissue level) and five *Bhutagni* (Highly selective regulation of micro nutrition at organ level)^{[1],[5],[6]}.

Rasayana's approach is a suitable and promising measure for achieving nutrition goals. Plants possessing *Ayuskara/Ayusya* etc. properties (adaptogenic, antioxidant) may be effective in geriatric problems, psycho-neuroendocrine disorders, stress-related conditions, psychosomatic disorders, free radical-induced disorders viz. degenerative disorders of osteopathy, arthropathy, diabetes and its complications,

autoimmune diseases, Cancer and so on. *Panchakarma* is a boon for many refractory clinical problems related to bio-oxidation, free radicals, autoimmune disorders, cancer, and immunodeficiency syndromes. While selecting the drug/food intervention, the specific effect of the chosen intervention must be considered to achieve the desired effects. Ayurvedic nutritional approach and various interventions for the prevention of sequential loss are suggested according to the age of the person, such as *Vaca*, *Kasmari* for age 0-10 years, *Asvagandha* for age 10-20, *Amalaki* for age 20-30, *Sankhapushpi*, *Jyotismati* for age 30-40, *Bhringaraja* for age 40-50 etc. ^[1]. *Achara Rasayana* is a form of *Rasayana* [means to provide excellence of tissue elements] wherein habitual intake of natural products like milk & *Ghrita* will bring about the excellence of *dhatu*/ tissue elements and *Satva*/Positive mental health.

CONCLUSION

Nutrition plays a significant role in Ayurvedic living. Ayurveda specialises in Ahara as a means to the good life, health and wellness. Healthy and wholesome food nourishes the mind, body and soul. Ayurveda asserts that although each person's digestive capacity may differ, the quality and appropriate quantity of food are necessary for a healthy life. Food taken in proper quantity provides strength, vigour, and good complexion and nurtures the health of the tissues. Similarly, to live healthy, one must live in harmony with one's surroundings and formulate a diet that balances one's doshas.

Dedicated measures are required to address the prevailing issues of malnutrition and nutrition for diseases and healthy persons. It is also crucial to create

an extensive method that will address the different sectors and dimensions of nutrition. Several scientific clinical and experimental studies have been conducted to validate the principles of Ayurveda dietetics and develop Ayurveda-based nutritional supplements. It has been established that the potential of Ayurvedic interventions is remarkable in malnutrition, improving physical endurance, and promoting health in children and adults. The holistic approach is the strength of Ayurveda.

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