

Concept of Food

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Abstract

Food plays a decisive role in the development, sustenance, reproduction and termination of life. Through centuries, food has been recognized as an important factor for human beings, in health and diseased state. Man has always been interested in food and the history of man to a large extent has been a struggle to obtain food. It is difficult to suggest the right food for all as it may vary from person to person depending on his nature. Therefore food is of supreme significance in the maintenance of healthy body and mind. The ancient science of Ayurveda gives due importance to food and its dietic regulation from long ago. Concept of food (*Ahara*) is one of the prime and novel concepts of Ayurveda. Since long Ayurveda has believed that food is a milestone in a person's health and recently modern science has also adhered to the above concept. Ayurveda gives prime importance to the prevention of diseases by elaborating the right lifestyle for a healthy today and healthier tomorrow. This is meant for strengthening the immune system of the body. Right diet and regimen are essential component of this right lifestyle. Diet is the science of food and its relationship to health. It is concerned primarily with the part played by nutrients in body growth, development and maintenance. Dietetics is the practical application of the principle of nutrition. It includes the planning of food for both the normal and sick persons. A set of dietic codes has been prescribed by Ayurveda. When food is taken judiciously, according to the codes of dietetics then only the benefits of *ahara* can be achieved. Any aberration in diets leads to ill health.

Keywords Food, *Ahara*



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INTRODUCTION

The main aim of Ayurveda is to preserve the health of a healthy person, and to treat the disease of a diseased one. Food (*Ahara*), Sleep (*Nidra*) and Celibacy (*Brahmacharya*) are the three pillars of life (*Trayopastambhas*) play an important role in the maintenance of health of an individual¹. Author Vagbhata compares the *trayopastambhas* to the pillars that support or are capable of supporting a mansion for prolonged period². Out of the three, food plays the grass root role in healthy, diseased and convalescent states. It is more important than the medicine itself. Food is primarily responsible for the growth, development and protection of the body, from decay and diseases.

An ideal food not only nourishes the body, but also nourishes the mind. Hence the type of food consumed influences the quality of mind too. *Satwika* food manifests in *satwika* mental attributes and thereby sustains the morality of the individual. *Rajasika* or *Tamasika ahara* contributes towards the growth of the same temperaments (*bhavas*) in the mind, resulting in a weak personality. Acharya Charaka, while explaining the

importance of food stated that food sustains the life of all living beings. Complexion, clarity, good voice, longevity, generousness, happiness, satisfaction, nourishment, strength and intellect all are maintained by the food. Professional activities leading to happiness in this world, Vedic rituals leading to salvation all are based on food³. Chakrapanidatta stated that for the preservation of health, the intake of food is essential. Food is the basis for the attainment of the four aims of life (*Purusharthacatustaya*). Sage Sushruta emphasizes that food is responsible for the satiation (*Preenana*) of the body. It produces instant strength, increases the life span, luster, happiness as well as normal mental activities like memory power etc⁴.

Acharya Charaka describes that “both the body and the disease are the outcome of food.” The variation between ease and disease arises on consuming the wholesome nutrition or the lack of it⁵. Food is the factor that sustains and supports the tissues of the body (*deha dhatus*), vitality (*ojus*), strength (*bala*) and complexion. Author Vagbhata maintains that “health depends on the food and the style in which it is taken (*Ahara Sevana Vidhi*). If the food is consumed

according to dietetic regulations, it protects health, otherwise it is manifested in diseases.

What to eat is the most important question with respect to food. Again this is a question that demands strict control of mind from the consumer. The colorful advertisements flashing around today tempt people with their catchy slogans and striking visuals into their net. This is tempting people to leave their old and harmless systems of diet and to try out the new dishes on their table. These new recipes may definitely satisfy the taste buds but will be harmful to the body in the long run. Therefore, it would be worthwhile to study the various principles regarding the type of food to be taken for the proper growth and maintenance of the body.

Definition and derivation of food (*ahara*)

The word “*Ahara*” is derived from the root “*HRN HARANE*” means to be taken in. The substance, which is to be taken in or swallowed in, through the throat, is called *ahara*¹⁹.

The word “*Anna*” is derived from the root ‘*AN*’ joined with ‘*NA*’ *pratyaya* meaning “to be taken in” or “which nourishes the body”²⁰

1. Dalhana has stated ‘*Aahriyate annanalikaya etyaahara*’ - meaning

that which is swallowed through esophagus is called *Ahara*.

2. Chakrapani has said that *ahara* means that which is ingested and thus it includes in itself both diet and drugs⁶. Author Gangadhara has also supported this by commenting, that which is ingested by the tongue down to the throat, is called *ahara*. Therefore drugs are also included in *ahara*.
3. Collins dictionary defined the word food, as “Any substance that can be ingested by a living organism and metabolized into energy and body tissue⁷”
4. Oxford dictionary defined the word food, as “any nutritious substances that people or animals eat or drink or that plants absorb in order to maintain life and growth⁸”

CLASSIFICATION OF FOOD

In Ayurvedic classics, materials (*dravyas*) are broadly classified as ‘*Ahara Dravya*’ and ‘*Aushadh Dravya*’ on basis of importance of taste (*Rasa pradhanya*) and importance of potency (*Virya Pradhanya*) respectively. Classification of *ahara dravyas* according to Charaka as

Table 1⁹.

Rasapanchaka and food

The difference between medicine and food is that medicine is gauged by its potency while food is gauged by its taste. The action of any *dravya* (food or drug) is attributed to five factors - *Rasa*, *Guna*, *Veerya* *Vipaka* and *Prabhava*.

ATTRIBUTES OF FOOD

Taste must not be the only principle governing a man's choice of food. He should look into the other qualities of food. The food should be eaten while it is hot and fresh. Such food tastes well and it also stimulates the digestive power (*jatharagni*) by its warmth. Thus it gets digested quickly and does not cause the production of toxins (*Ama*). It should be remembered here that cold food being heated again is not considered as hot.

- Every diet should contain foods like clarified butter that are unctuous. This will make it delicious which in

turn stimulate the *jatharagni*, as a result of which the body is strengthened. Too *rooksha* food on the other hand will cause *vatakopa* and diseases caused by increase of *vata*.

- The food items that we consume are a mixture of different tastes and preparations etc. Care should be taken that this combination do not become antagonistic to each other as this may lead o several diseases. For example, milk with its *sheeta veerya* and *madhura vipaka* is opposite to *Kulatha* with its *amla vipaka* and *ushna veerya*.
- The choice of food is as important as its time and amount. It is not only the improper time or amount alone that can upset digestion, consumption of too hot, too cold, unclean and overcooked or under cooked foods must be avoided.

Table 1: Classification of *ahara dravyas*⁹

Source (2)	Action On body (2)	Swarupa (4)	Taste (6)	Quality (20)	Combination and Preparation
<i>Jangama</i>	<i>Hita</i>	<i>Pana</i>	<i>Madhura</i>	<i>Guru-Laghu</i>	
<i>Sthavara</i>	<i>Ahita</i>	<i>Asana</i>	<i>Amla</i>	<i>Sheeta-Ushna</i>	Innumerable
		<i>Bhaksya</i>	<i>Lavana</i>	<i>Snigdha-Ruksha</i>	
		<i>Lehya</i>	<i>Katu</i>	<i>Manda-Teekshna</i>	
			<i>Tikta</i>	<i>Sthira-Sara</i>	
			<i>Kasaya</i>	<i>Mridu-Kathina</i>	
				<i>Vishada-Picchila</i>	
				<i>Slakshna-Khara</i>	
				<i>Sthoola-Sookshma</i>	
				<i>Drava-Sandra</i>	

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- Too dry or *rooksha* foods leads to the loss of strength and color, dryness of the skin and obstruction of bowel movements and constipation by causing *vatakopa*.
- Too unctuous (*snigdha*) foods on the other hand cause the aggravation of *kapha* and a variety of *kaphaja* diseases like salivation (*praseka*), heaviness (*gourava*) etc. It also leads to loss of appetite.
- Too hot foods cause vitiation of *pitta* and a host of *paitika* diseases like hemorrhagic disorders (*raktapita*), burning sensation (*daha*), thirst (*trishna*) etc.
- Too cold foods cause dampening of digestive fire and thereby loss of appetite. Too hard or uncooked foods cause difficulty in evacuation

of faeces and urine. It does not provide satisfaction to the mind.

- Too liquid foods cause diseases like rhinitis (*peenasa*), cough (*kasa*) and diabetes (*prameham*).
- Too sweet foods lead to decreased metabolism (*agnimandyam*).
- Too salty foods are not good for the eyes and hair and too sour foods cause faster ageing.

Food and Mental attitudes

The Indian school of thought is based on the three mental states (*trigunas*) that pervade this whole universe - *Satwa*, *Rajas* and *Tamas*. Food has also been brought under this triad. The classification of food based on the *trigunas* means that a person with a *satwika* frame of mind will prefer a *satwika* kind of food conversely it can also be said that a person who follows a *satwika* diet will

develop a *satwika* frame of mind. This is true of *rajasa* and *tamasa* foods also. It may seem amazing as to how the type of food can influence one's thoughts or bring about a change in his mental frame work;

- *Satwika* food is one that increases health and happiness. It is pleasing to the mind and nourishing to the body. It is composed of all the six tastes (*rasas*) in equal measure and balanced in its qualities.
- *Rajasa* food is hot and spicy in nature; it is more sour and salty and produces sorrow in the mind and disease in the body.
- The *tamasa* group of food is the worst of all; it is called spoilt, devoid of any taste, stale and harmful to the mind and body.

The food that reaches the body gets divided in to three parts after digestion. The major parts of it end up as waste products to be expelled from the body while the remaining part nourishes the body. The subtlest part of food becomes a part of the mind. In this way a correct diet makes a strong body 'home of a sound mind.

Dietetic regulation in Ayurveda

Food may be wholesome as well as unwholesome. The wholesomeness depends upon the variation in dose, time, methods of preparation, habitat, constitution of the body, disease and the age of an individual¹⁰.

Due to the above reason ayurvedic classics have laid down some rules and regulations for taking the diet. Even though a man takes wholesome food, he should observe the followings dietetic rules, to achieve proper digestion, assimilation and health of the body. Both healthy persons as well as patients should follow these rules.

One should consume only that food in¹⁸

- Proper quantity(*Matravat*) which is hot (*Ushna*), unctuous(*Snigdha*),
- Consumed after the digestion of previously ingested food
- Potency compatible food (*Virya Aviruddha Ahara*)
- Taken in designated pleasant place(*Eshta desha*)where it is provided with all fond equipment(*sarvopakarana*)
- Not taken speedily
- Not taken too slowly
- Taken alone
- Taken without laughing

- Taken with the concentration of the mind
- Taken after paying due regard to one self.

If one eats in conformity to these rules, he is not liable to any type of the ill effects coming from eating without measure. Author Bhavamisra and other *acharyas* have also supported the same view.

Acharya Charaka has laid down eight factors, determining the utility of food, which are known as “*Astavidhahara Visesayatanas*”¹¹

They are as under:

1. Prakrti : Here Prakrti denotes the natural qualities of the *ahara dravyas* i.e. the inherent attributes like *Guru* and *Laghu* etc. of the diets and drugs. For example *masha* is *guru* in nature. Likewise *mudga* is *laghu* in nature.

2. Karana: *Karana* means the process or preparation. The mode of preparation or processing changes the natural properties of the substances. Thus there is a change of qualities of the materials (*dravyas*) due to the processing like dilution, application of heat, cleaning, storing, germination,

flavoring, preservation and the material of the receptacle etc.

3. Samyoga: The combination of individual things with two or more things is known as *Samyoga*.

4. Rashi: The quantity of food, which is to be taken in, is known as *Rashi*.

5. Desha: *Desha* denotes the habitat. It determines the variations of the qualities of the substances according to their geographic region, due to different soil, use and their acclimatization to that particular region.

6. Kala: Time factor is described in dual context; one pertains with daily and seasonal variations while other deals with individual’s condition of age and disease.

7. Upayoga Samstha: It consists of dietetic rules.

8. Upayokta: It means the person who takes food.

Terms related to food:

1. Pathya and Apathya:

According to Charakacarya *pathya* means the wholesome food and drugs, which do not adversely affect the body and mind, while those, which adversely affect the body and

mind, are considered as *Apathya*¹². “*Pathya*” in fact changes its qualities, depending on the *Matra* (dose), *Kala* (time), *Kriya* (method of preparation), *Bhumi* (habitate), *Deha* (body) and *Dosha* (*Vatadi* body component)¹³.

Well known Chikitsa granth of medieval period “*Vaidya Jivan*” by. Lolimbraj has stated the importance of *Pathya - Apathya* in Chikitsa as if a person follows the dietary rules for particular disease there is very little significance of drug treatment and when a person is exposed to *apathya* the drug treatment has no value because taken drug can't cure the disease.

2. *Hita and Ahita Ahara*

Acharyas have given good or bad dietetic habit under the heading of *hita* or *ahita*. The most accurate definition is - “The food articles, which maintain the equilibrium of bodily *dhatu*s and help in eliminating the disturbance of their equilibrium, are to be regarded as *hitakara ahara* otherwise they are *ahitakara* to body”. Charaka has stated that *hitakara* diet is the only cause of growth and development of body and *ahitakara* diets is the only cause of disease¹⁴.

3. *Satmyam - Asatmyam*

According to Dalhan *satmya* mean substances of pleasure to one self¹⁵.

A substance conducive to an individual is called “*satmya*” and the use of such substances results in the well being of that individual¹⁶. Considering this Charaka has stated that if one has achieved *sarvarasa satmya*, yet he should take diet as according to *astavidh ahara visesayatana*¹⁷.

CONCLUSION

Concept of food (*Ahara*) is one of the prime and novel concepts of Ayurveda. But present Indian society lacks the awareness regarding ayurvedic dietetics principles. Due to this ignorance or carelessness most of the individual consume diet without considering rules and regulations of dietetics. Any food (*Ahara*) which is not prepared as per the dietetic code *Astaaharavidhi Visesayatana* does not benefit the body; on the contrary, it harms the body by vitiating *dosahs* and *dhatu*s. Modern science also accepts the role of diet & food in pathogenesis of various diseases. Therefore, it is our duty to follow

ayurvedic rules & regulation of dietetics in
our day today life.

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