

An Introduction to

Ayurveda

By Dr. Claudia Welch

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Ayurveda

Ayurveda, literally “the science of life,” is a science of medicine that originated in India between two and five—even ten—thousand years ago (depending on who you ask). It includes a comprehensive study of anatomy, physiology, pathology, diagnostic systems and treatment strategies. Even today, in India, it is practiced alone or together with western (allopathic) medicine in hospitals, clinics, private practices, cities and villages.

Two elegant and practical features of Ayurveda are the concepts of Prakruti and Vikruti: an individual’s unique constitution and current imbalance, respectively.

Prakruti: Your Ayurvedic Constitution

Prakruti—an individual’s baseline constitution—is determined at the moment of conception and relates to inherited or permanent physical and emotional characteristics and tendencies. These would include qualities such as height, natural eye and hair color and innate personality traits.

Ayurveda teaches that the Universe, and her subjects, are all made from five basic, archetypal “elements”. These are not synonymous with the elements of our table of elements. They are earth, water, fire, air and ether. Each element yields certain qualities that manifest in the universe and in each human being, as his or her individual constitution. There are as many different constitutions as there are human beings. For the sake of practicality however, Ayurveda has categorized three main constitutional forces, which are responsible for the harmonious function of the five elements within the human being. These forces (or doshas) are called “Vata,” “Pitta,” and “Kapha.” Vata is associated with the Air and Ether elements, Pitta with Fire and Water and Kapha with Earth and Water. There is no perfect translation for Vata, Pitta, Kapha or even the word dosha, so I will use these terms themselves here.

While all three doshas are present in every constitution, they are present in different ratios. For example, I may have a high concentration of Pitta in my constitution, with Kapha secondary and only a small amount of Vata, but someone else may have more Vata and Pitta and less Kapha.

Knowing our constitution—our Prakruti—is useful because it increases awareness of our inherently dominant qualities—our natural strengths and challenges. This can be a positive step towards understanding health.

Vikruti: Your Current Imbalance

Another step towards understanding health according to Ayurvedic principles is to understand if and how we have strayed from our natural, healthy constitution. Vikruti is a Sanskrit word loosely translated as a "changed condition of body, mind and consciousness." In Ayurveda, it is most often used to describe your current state of health (or ill-health) in relation to your Prakruti, or "natural state."

Vata, Pitta and Kapha are positive forces in the body but, due to environmental, emotional or physical conditions or stresses, they can increase or, less often, decrease beyond what is appropriate for our constitution. Vitiated doshas may cause imbalance in the body or mind. This imbalance, or Vikruti,

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creates an environment that is more hospitable to disease than if the Prakruti (constitution) is balanced and healthy.

While Prakruti governs permanent characteristics, Vikruti reflects temporary changes, like gaining or losing pounds, feeling nervous or irritable, developing a cold or flu, etc.

Restoring Health and Balance Through Ayurveda treatments

As Prakruti (constitution) and Vikruti (current imbalance) are unique to each of us, what may be medicine for one may even harm another.

Knowing a person's Prakruti and Vikruti determines what diet, lifestyle, therapies and remedies are likely to help each individual gain, maintain or regain optimum health in body and mind.

When you chose to receive Ayurvedic therapies, you will be asked to complete a small amount of paperwork. (Perhaps you have already done this). This paperwork helps your therapists determine the course of your treatments. They first look at your Vikruti and customize your treatments according to which doshas are most increased. If there is minimal or no Vikruti, your therapists then look to your Prakruti to determine which oils to use in your treatments and how to modify the treatments to best suit you. While we know it might feel inconvenient to fill out the paperwork, it is essential for us to design a treatment that will be of most benefit to you.

About Ayurvedic Treatments

Shamana vs. Shodhana

We have already seen that the increase of the three doshas can lead to a less healthy internal environment. Ayurveda offers different methods to restore balance. *Shamana*, palliative therapies, pacify any increased doshas whereas *shodhana*, cleansing therapies, forcibly expel them from the body.

Often warm oil treatments are commonly mislabeled "panchakarma" treatments. Panchakarma, literally "five actions," refers to therapies that include medicated enemas and bloodletting, and lay within the domain of *shodhana*. When warm oil treatments are used to prepare patients for panchakarma, it is in the context of *shodhana* and is a distinctly medical practice, requiring the supervision of a qualified Ayurvedic physician and strong herbal medications. Most spa treatments lay purely within the domain of *shamana*; designed to pacify increased doshas within the body and gently promote balance.

There are certain health conditions that are contra-indicated for receiving all, or portions of, the different treatments. Our staff will assist you with this.

What You Can Expect

Responses to these treatments range from a feeling of gentle relaxation to a profound sense that change and healing is taking place somewhere deep within you. Sometimes laughter comes. Sometimes tears. Sometimes a desire to share with the therapists. Sometimes a desire to explore the experience in silence.

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We request that you please let the therapists know if you ever feel uncomfortable, and express to them what you need. While our massage therapists are compassionate and skilled, they are not medical practitioners. It is up to you to know your limits and respect them. For example, don't stay in the steam longer than is comfortable, express to the therapists if you are in an uncomfortable position, if their pressure is too hard or light, and so on.

It is most beneficial to block out free time for yourself after the treatments, as you may feel extremely relaxed, introspective or quiet. If you've experienced notable emotions, memories or states of consciousness you may wish to journal, share them with a friend or take time alone.

If emotions come up it is often most beneficial just to let them come up and pass, without analyzing them, trying to determine when or why they arose, or where they came from. Once the emotion has passed, many people feel less anxiety, irritability and stress, a greater sense of health and balance and a renewed sense that things are as they should be.

How to maximize the Benefits

Diet

In Ayurveda, healthy digestion is considered to be of great importance. If what we eat is well digested, absorbed and assimilated, the building blocks for our tissues and organs are wholesome, and provide a strong foundation for health.

Because these treatments may incite increased doshas to the digestive tract, from where they will be eliminated, it is ideal to eat a diet that supports healthy digestion. It may be beneficial to follow the guidelines below, in general, but at least for a week before, during and a few weeks after receiving these treatments.

Enjoy:

- Mostly whole, freshly cooked foods including cooked grains
- Warm, nourishing foods
- Warm drinks
- Chewing your food thoroughly, in a calm environment
- Taking a deep breath after swallowing your last bite, before going on to your next activity
- Eat meals at regular times every day

Avoid:

- Fruit or fruit juice within ½ hr. of any other food
- Highly processed foods (like frozen, canned, packaged or fast food)
- Cold food
- Raw food (fruits, veggies, salads), especially in the morning and evening. They are okay to have in the middle of the day.
- Cold or carbonated drinks
- Deep fried food
- Refined sugar
- Caffeine, especially coffee
- Cigarette smoking

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- Alcohol
- Recreational drugs
- Red meat
- Eating while anxious or upset

Lifestyle

During the days where you receive these treatments it is beneficial to observe the following guidelines:

Enjoy:

- Plenty of relaxation
- Journaling
- Meditation
- Gentle yoga

Avoid:

- Excessive exercise, including strenuous yoga. If you take a class, let the instructor know that you are receiving Ayurvedic treatments and that you are not going to push yourself too much in the classes.
- Sex, on the days that you receive the treatments.
- Late nights
- Getting chilled
- Getting in upsetting or stressful situations

Education

With a minimum investment of time spent learning some fundamental Ayurvedic principles, it is possible to receive a maximum return on awareness of which dietary and lifestyle choices will be most likely to promote health for your particular constitution.

Below is a basic overview of Vata, Pitta and Kapha and how to bring them into balance. If you are interested in further information, you can refer to the Satya Ayurveda Trust website, at: <http://satyaayurveda.org/index.html>.

Vata

Tatra ruksho laghu sheeta, khara sukshmathalo nilah
The qualities of Vata are dry, light, cool, rough, subtle and mobile
-Ashtanga Hridayam: Sutrasthana: 1:11

The Qualities of Vata

This Sanskrit line lists the main qualities of Vata and provides a key to understanding what it means to have a predominantly Vata Prakruti.

The main qualities of Vata are dry, light, cool, rough, subtle and mobile. So, having a Vata-predominant Prakruti means that these qualities express themselves generously throughout your mental, emotional and physical make up. A Vata predominant individual's strengths and weaknesses both reflect these qualities.

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- In excess, the dry and rough qualities may manifest themselves as dry or brittle skin, lips, hair, nails or bones (e.g. osteoporosis), as constipation, or as feeling "dry" emotionally, or isolated.
- The "light" quality may manifest itself as giving you a lanky physique but excess lightness may manifest as being underweight, having muscle wasting, light bones, insomnia or feeling "spacey" or insecure.
- The cold quality of Vata may lead you to feel cold more easily than others around you, have cold hands and feet, crave warmth and tend to be fearful.
- The subtle quality may express itself as being introverted, creative and having an active fantasy life.
- The mobile quality may lead to a healthy ability to "multi-task" or, in excess, to scattered attention, a fidgety tendency, tremors, and nervousness. It may manifest as extremes; as in being very tall or very short or being drastically different weights at different times in your life.

Decreasing or Balancing Vata

Like increases Like

A basic tenet of Ayurveda is "like increases like." Therefore, increasing the inherent qualities of Vata will increase Vata in your body, mind and spirit.

For example, because Vata is inherently cool - cool weather, cool foods, the cool seasons and times of day, and even cool emotions can increase Vata. Likewise, dry seasons, foods, environments or emotions will increase the dry quality and thereby increase Vata.

Example: You are a Vata individual. One of the qualities of Vata is dryness. You live in a dry climate, like a desert, and you regularly snack on dry crackers. This added dryness adds to the dry quality of Vata, which you already have plenty of. This usually increases Vata and can lead to dry conditions like constipation or dry skin. This is an extreme example to illustrate the point.

Tastes That Increase and Decrease Vata

Along with the main qualities of Vata, it is also helpful to know those tastes that increase and decrease Vata.

Pungent (spicy), bitter and astringent tastes increase Vata by increasing its drying and cooling qualities. An example of the pungent taste is chili peppers. Bitter and astringent tastes are common in most leafy greens and many herbs.

The sweet, sour and salty tastes decrease Vata by bringing moisture, bulk and warmth to the body, which are opposite qualities to those of Vata. An example of a naturally sweet taste is wheat; of sour: pickles; of salty: seaweed.

Opposites as Medicine

As said above, each of us has a unique proportion of the three doshas in our Prakritis. Ayurveda teaches us that if a dosha increases beyond its original, natural proportion for us, it fosters an environment where disease can flourish.

It is common for our predominant dosha (Vata, Pitta or Kapha) to increase more quickly than other doshas because we tend to perpetuate what we know best. For example, if your dominant dosha is Vata, you will naturally incline towards a life filled with activity, due to the mobile quality of Vata. However, if you are too active, you are likely to eventually aggravate Vata and thereby exhaust the nervous system.

If a dosha increases in our bodies, Ayurveda suggests that we will want to decrease it in order to regain a healthy balance in our constitution.

Medicines are substances that decrease the excess dosha by providing the opposite qualities to it. For example, if Vata has increased due to excess activity, a quiet, calm environment can be a medicine. If it has increased due to excess dryness, wetness can be the medicine. Too much cold? Use heat.

One of the wonderfully practical aspects of Ayurveda is that anything can be used as a medicine because everything that exists has a quality. This includes but is not limited to: warm oil treatments, herbs, foods, colors, drinks, environments, smells and lifestyles.

Qualities opposite to Vata are moist, grounding, warming, smooth, oily and stabilizing. It is therefore best for Vata individuals to seek out physical and emotional environments, routines, and foods that possess these opposite qualities.

Opposites in Diet as Medicine

A Vata individual does well to have warming, freshly cooked, nourishing, mushy foods, like soups, stews and one-pot-meals. Because of the inherent "light" quality in Vata, you may think that heavy foods would nicely balance that quality but actually too much heavy food-or just too much food at a sitting--is too heavy for the delicate Vata digestive system.

Because the sweet, sour and salty tastes decrease Vata, these tastes should be predominant in your diet.

When selecting sweet foods, note that naturally sweet foods like many grains, squashes, and most fruits are appropriate, but processed foods high in refined sugars are not at all balancing for Vata. Refined sugars merely offer a quick burst of energy, followed by a "crash," a pattern that is already a hallmark feature of Vata, and one that the Vata individual does well to avoid.

Opposites in Climate and Lifestyle as Medicine

The ideal environment for a Vata individual is warm and wet, like Hawaii. Sweet or grounding scents, like the essential oils of rose, jatamansi or mitti; sweet music and sweet emotions are also good

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"medicines" for Vata. A daily, 10-20 minute, gentle self-massage with warm (untoasted) sesame oil or, even better, an herbalized oil specific for Vata, can positively change the life of a Vata individual.

The mobile quality of Vata can drive Vata-types to do "1000" things at one time. This can lead to exhaustion of the nervous system, which in turn causes emotional and physical restlessness and eventual "dis-ease." While a routine can feel contrary to your nature, it can be extremely beneficial for you to incorporate into your life. For example, rising and going to bed at about the same time every day, giving regular time to meditation, gentle yoga or other strengthening exercise that is easy on the joints. Also try having regular meals, chewing them thoroughly and taking a breath before moving on to your next activity.

In general, it is best to move through life as if you were, say, a tai chi master. Ask yourself, "If a tai chi master were faced with this situation, how would she act?" Then enjoy playing that part.

Famous Vata Examples

Christy Turlington. Lanky. Moves around a lot. Very tall. Angular face.

Mick Jagger. Jumps around. Creative. Lanky. Disproportionate features.

Simple Guidelines For Decreasing Vata

If your Vata is elevated, you may be experiencing some of the following signs or symptoms:

- nervousness, anxiety, panic, fear
- twitches, tics, tremors, spasms
- dry or chapped skin
- constipation, gas, bloating, dry, hard stools
- low body weight
- dislike or fear of cold and wind
- difficulty tolerating loud noises
- light, interrupted sleep
- a spacey, scattered feeling
- excess thinking or worrying

To decrease Vata, Ayurveda has given us dietary, lifestyle and herbal treatment strategies. Here are a few underlying concepts that these strategies are based on:

- Routine
- Warmth
- Serenity
- Nourishment

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Vata-Reducing Diet:

General Guidelines:

Enjoy:

- Naturally sweet, sour and salty foods.
- Warm foods, like soup, porridge, stews, etc.
- Whole, freshly cooked foods.
- A limited selection of legumes, including mung dahl, tofu or tempeh that is well-cooked and warm soy milk spiced with cinnamon and nutmeg.
- Warming spices like ginger, black pepper, cinnamon and cumin, but not extremely hot spices like cayenne pepper.
- Plenty of room temperature or warm drinks.
- Dairy, as long as it is not very cold and you are able to tolerate it. Avoid drinking milk with your meals. It is best to have it warm and spiced with cinnamon and nutmeg, at least an hour before or after other food.
- A generous amount of high-quality oils or ghee in your daily diet.
- Routine times for your meals.
- Taking a deep breath after swallowing your last bite and heading off for your next activity.
- Eating your meal in a peaceful environment.

Avoid:

- Bitter, astringent and pungent (spicy) foods.
- Cold food.
- Dry and light foods (e.g. popcorn and crackers).
- Too much raw food, especially in the mornings and evenings (salads, carrot sticks, raw fruit, fresh fruit and vegetable juices, etc.)
- Most beans, including cold soy products.
- Highly processed foods (like canned or frozen foods, "TV" dinners or pastries).
- Cold or carbonated drinks.
- Caffeine, nicotine and other stimulants.
- Overeating or eating very heavy meals.
- Eating fresh fruit or drinking fruit juice within 1/2 hr of any other food.
- Foods or drinks that contain refined sugar or corn syrup.
- Deep fried foods.
- Hard alcohol.
- Eating when you are upset, nervous, in the car or "on the go."

Vata-Pacifying-Lifestyle:

General Guidelines:

Enjoy:

- Live as you would imagine a master would: with calm awareness and a gentle pace.
- A regular, daily routine with regular times for eating, sleeping, working, etc.
- A daily 10-20 min. self-massage (*abhyanga*) with 1/2 c. warm, Vata-pacifying oil. See the *abhyanga* article at: <http://satyaayurveda.org/index.html> for complete directions.

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- A gentle exercise routine that includes a calm, stretch-focused form of yoga, Tai qi (tai chi), qi gong (chi gong), walking, swimming (but don't get chilled) about five times per week.
- Keeping warm, no matter what the weather.
- Sweet, soothing music, smells, scenes and company.

Pitta

Pittam sasneha tikshnoshnam laghu visram, saram dravam
Pitta is oily, sharp, hot, light, fleshy-smelling, spreading and liquid
-Ashtanga Hridayam: Sutrasthana: 1:11

The Qualities of Pitta

This Sanskrit line lists the main qualities of Pitta and provides a key to understanding what it means to have a predominantly Pitta Prakruti.

The main qualities of Pitta are oily, sharp, hot, light, fleshy smelling, spreading and liquid. So, having a Pitta -predominant Prakruti means that these qualities express themselves generously throughout your mental, emotional and physical make up. You may find them reflected in your strengths and weaknesses.

- The oily quality allows for softness of skin but, in excess, can manifest as oily skin, acne or perhaps the quality of being a "snake oil salesman"; manipulating situations to your advantage.
- The sharp quality may manifest as a sharp, bright intellect or, in excess, as a sharp tongue.
- "Hotness" can manifest as a warm, rosy complexion, warm body temperature, strong metabolism and appetite or, in excess, as ulcers, heartburn or a hot temper.
- The light quality may lead you to have a slender body or to get light-headed if you miss a meal.
- The "fleshy-smelling" quality may manifest as a strong body odor.
- The spreading quality may manifest as a tendency to spread your name or influence or opinion around the local or global neighborhood. This quality can also manifest as a spreading rash.
- The liquid quality may manifest as excess sweating; when it's combined with the hot quality it can present as excess stomach acid.

Decreasing or Balancing Pitta

Like increases Like

A basic tenet of Ayurveda is "like increases like." Therefore, increasing the inherent qualities of Pitta will increase Pitta in your body, mind and spirit.

For example, because Pitta is inherently hot - hot weather, hot foods, the hot seasons and times of day, and even hot emotions can increase Pitta. Likewise humid environments will increase the liquid quality and thereby increase Pitta.

Example: You are a Pitta individual. Pitta is hot in nature. You visit the equator for a vacation and you sunbathe for six hours daily and enjoy hot, spicy food daily for one week. At the end of the week you suffer from an acute rash and terrible heartburn and find yourself in an awful temper. Ayurveda would

say that your heat-increasing indulgences exacerbated the natural heat in your Pitta constitution and lead to hot conditions "erupting" in your body and emotions. This is an extreme example to illustrate a point.

Tastes That Increase and Decrease Pitta

Along with the main qualities of Pitta, it is also helpful to know those tastes that increase Pitta and those that decrease Pitta.

Pungent (spicy), sour and salty tastes increase Pitta, by increasing its hot quality. An example of the pungent taste is chilli pepper; of sour: pickles and of salty: salt.

Sweet, bitter and astringent tastes will decrease Pitta by providing the opposite qualities to those of Pitta. An example of a naturally sweet taste is wheat; of bitter and astringent (which are often coupled): many leafy greens and many herbs.

Opposites as Medicine

Each of us has a unique proportion of the three doshas in our Prakritis. Ayurveda teaches us that if a dosha increases beyond its original, natural proportion for us, it fosters an environment where disease can flourish.

It is common for our predominant dosha (Vata, Pitta or Kapha) to increase more quickly than other doshas because we tend to perpetuate what we know the best. For example, if your dominant dosha is Pitta, you may be intellectually bright, due to the hot and sharp qualities of Pitta. However, this very quality that is inherent in Pitta may eventually aggravate it and create mental or physical "burn out."

Medicines are substances, which decrease the excess dosha by providing the opposite qualities to it. For example, if excess mental wrestling has resulted in "burn out," a comfortable, soft couch and a cool mind can be medicines. If it has increased due to excess heat, coolness can be the medicine. Too much moisture? Use dryness.

One of the wonderfully practical aspects of Ayurveda is that anything can be used as a medicine because everything that exists has a quality. This includes but is not limited to: herbs, foods, drinks, environments, colors, smells and lifestyles.

Qualities opposite to Pitta are those that are dry, soft, cool, heavy, sweet smelling, and contained. It is therefore best for Pitta individuals to seek out physical and emotional environments, routines, and foods that possess these opposite qualities.

Opposites in Diet as Medicine

A Pitta individual does well to have fresh, cooling foods. They have difficulty skipping meals because they tend to have strong appetites. Because they also have strong digestive systems, they tend to tolerate raw foods better than the other doshas but they must be careful to avoid hot foods, alcohol, caffeine, irritability, high aggression and anger because these will create too much Pitta and weaken the digestive system.

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Because the sweet, bitter and astringent tastes decrease Pitta, these tastes should be predominant in your diet. Note that this is not necessarily a green light to eat refined sugary foods and drinks. The naturally sweet taste that is found in many grains, squashes, natural sweeteners and fruits is most appropriate and can help balance Pitta.

Opposites in Climate and Lifestyle as Medicine

The ideal environment for a Pitta individual is cool and dry. Cold weather sports like skiing and ice-skating or early morning exercise is best. Sweet smells, like the essential oils of rose, and khus; melodic music and sweet emotions are also good "medicines" for Pitta. A daily, 10-20 minute, gentle self-massage with warm sunflower or, even better, Pitta-pacifying herbalized oil, will help cool the heat of Pitta and support you to surrender and "go with the flow" rather than using your will to force the flow.

It is easy for the Pitta individual to feel that, if he just works long and hard enough, he can control everything. It is this quality, on a global scale, that allows human beings to think nothing of controlling or manipulating nature to bend to our idea of what is best. This works well if it is a balanced approach, enabling us to predict nasty weather and thereby prepare for it or to diagnose certain illnesses and thereby enable us to treat them better. An extreme example of this outlook, is manipulating genetic material without regard to problematic future ramifications. An incredibly extreme example of this outlook gone out of control would be that of a dictator attempting genocide in an attempt to align global reality with his personal view of how things should be.

On a more personal scale, this tendency may lead us to strive for control and personal domination in our relationships or career, or we may allow our rampant personal ambition to drive us into eventual mental or physical "burnout."

One of the best medicines for Pitta is surrender. If you can develop a gentle faith in-- or relationship with-- a divine power or natural force that you believe can do a fine job of orchestrating personal and universal life, then you can give your will a rest and take off some pressure. For this reason, it is beneficial for a Pitta individual to enjoy regular meditation. (And really enjoy it; not just do it as if it is another task they need to master).

Famous Pitta Examples

Madonna: Sharp businesswoman. World-famous. Ambitious. Moderate build.

Bill Gates. Sharply intelligent. His fame has spread everywhere, even beyond his own professional sphere. Ambitious. Balding.

Simple Guidelines For Decreasing Pitta

If Pitta is elevated, you may be experiencing some of the following signs or symptoms:

- red, inflamed rash, acne, cold sores
- acute inflammation in body or joints
- acid reflux, gastric or peptic ulcers, heartburn
- nausea or discomfort upon missing meals

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- loose stools
- uncomfortable feeling of heat in the body
- frustration, anger, irritability
- judgment, impatience, criticism, intolerance
- red, inflamed or light-sensitive eyes
- excessive perfectionist tendencies

To decrease Pitta, Ayurveda has given us dietary, lifestyle and herbal treatment strategies. Here are a few underlying concepts that these strategies are based on:

- Cooling
- Surrendering
- Moderation

Pitta-Pacifying Diet:

General Guidelines:

Enjoy:

- Naturally sweet, bitter and astringent foods.
- A balance of whole, freshly cooked foods and fresh, raw foods.
- Most beans.
- Cooling herbs and spices like coriander, cilantro, fennel and cardamom.
- Dairy, if you digest it well, but avoid drinking milk with your meals. It is best to have it at least an hour before or after other food.
- A moderate amount of high-quality olive, sunflower and coconut oils or ghee in your daily diet.
- Routine times for your meals.
- Taking a deep breath after swallowing your last bite and heading off for your next activity.
- Eating your meal in a peaceful environment

Avoid:

- Pungent (spicy), sour and salty foods.
- Hot spices like chili and cayenne peppers.
- Highly processed foods (like canned or frozen foods, "TV" dinners or pastries).
- Eating fresh fruit or drinking fruit juice within 1/2 hr of any other food.
- Caffeine, nicotine and other stimulants.
- Red meat.
- Deep fried foods.
- Alcohol, except for an occasional beer or white wine.
- Eating while you are upset.

Pitta-Pacifying-Lifestyle:

General Guidelines:

Enjoy:

- Surrendering rather than controlling.
- Surrender to the pace of your body. In other words, if your body or mind feels tired, it's a good idea to slow down or even stop and rest.

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- A regular, daily routine with regular times for eating, sleeping, working, etc. Make sure you have time to play and to relax as well as to work.
- A daily 10-20 min. self-massage (*abhyanga*) with 1/2 c. warm, Pitta-pacifying oil. See the *abhyanga* article at: <http://satyaayurveda.org/index.html> for complete directions.
- A moderate exercise routine that includes a challenging form of yoga, swimming or biking, about five times per week. Avoid exercising during the hot part of the day.
- Keeping yourself cool, mind and body.
- Sweet and soothing music, smells, scenes and company.

Kapha

Snigdha shita gururmandah slakshno mritsnah sthirah Kaphah

Kapha is unctuous, cool, heavy, slow, smooth, soft and static

-Ashtanga Hridayam: Sutrasthana:1:12

The Qualities of Kapha

This Sanskrit line lists the main qualities of Kapha and provides a key to understanding what it means to have a predominantly Kapha Prakruti.

The main qualities of Kapha are unctuous, cool, heavy, slow, smooth, soft and stable. It is also dense, cloudy and viscous. So, having a Kapha-predominant Prakruti means that these qualities express themselves generously throughout your mental, emotional and physical make up. You may find them reflected in your strengths and weaknesses.

- The unctuous quality can allow for smooth joint function but, if pronounced, can lead to excess mucous.
- The cool quality may manifest as cool skin and a laid-back, cool temperament.
- Heaviness may manifest as a large, sturdy, grounded physical and emotional constitution and, in excess, as being overweight or experiencing a subjective feeling of heaviness in the mind.
- Slowness may manifest as a slow gait or a slow, steady pace that you can maintain. In excess, you may get stuck in a pattern that may not be the best for you.
- Softness can manifest as a soft heart that is easily empathic. Another manifestation of this quality is having soft skin.
- Stability can be an asset that friends, family and colleagues probably recognize and perhaps lean on, but in excess could become stubbornness or sluggishness. You could become so stable that you are disinclined toward any physical activity.
- Density can manifest as good stamina and strong, well-formed muscles and bones. This enables the Kapha constitution to withstand vigorous exercise. This quality is also responsible for dense, luxurious hair.

Decreasing or Balancing Kapha

Like Increases Like

A basic tenet of Ayurveda is "like increases like." Therefore, increasing the inherent qualities of Kapha will increase Kapha in your body, mind and spirit.

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For example, because Kapha is inherently cool, heavy and wet - cold weather, heavy foods or wet seasons tend to increase Kapha. Knowing this can help identify which lifestyle choices, foods or environments will bring balance to your constitution.

Example: You are a Kapha individual. Kapha is heavy, dense, wet, cold and static. If you eat a large bowl of ice cream (heavy, dense wet and cold,) at night (cold) in winter in Vermont (cold, wet), you can be sure that Kapha will increase in your system. The next morning you may find yourself with a cold, having gained a pound or two (the increase of heavy and dense) and less likely to move than ever (static).

Tastes That Increase and Decrease Kapha

Along with the main qualities of Kapha, it is also helpful to know those tastes that increase or decrease Kapha.

Sweet, sour and salty tastes increase Kapha by increasing bulk and moisture in the body and mind, and by perpetuating the qualities of Kapha. An example of the naturally sweet taste is wheat; of sour: a pickle; of salty: salt.

The pungent, bitter and astringent tastes traditionally decrease Kapha by drying the body and providing the opposite qualities to those of Kapha. An example of the pungent taste is chili pepper; of bitter and astringent (which are often coupled): many leafy greens and many herbs.

Opposites as Medicine

Each of us has a unique proportion of the three doshas in our Prakritis. Ayurveda teaches us that if a dosha increases beyond its original, natural proportion for us, it fosters an environment where disease can flourish.

It is common for our predominant dosha (Vata, Pitta or Kapha) to increase more quickly than other doshas because we tend to perpetuate what we know best. For example, if your dominant dosha is Kapha, due to the slow quality of Kapha you may be naturally inclined toward calming activities. In excess, this quality may lead to stagnation.

If a dosha increases in our bodies, Ayurveda suggests that we will want to decrease it in order to restore healthy balance to our constitution.

Medicines are substances that decrease the excess dosha by providing the opposite qualities to it. For example, if Kapha has increased due to excess stagnation in your life, activity can be a medicine. If it has increased due to excess coolness, you can use heat as a medicine. Too much heaviness? Use lightness.

One of the practical aspects of Ayurveda is that anything can be used as a medicine because everything that exists has a quality. This includes but is not limited to: herbs, foods, drinks, environments, colors, smells and lifestyles.

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Qualities opposite to Kapha are predominantly warm, dry, light and active. It is therefore best for Kapha individuals to seek out physical and emotional environments, routines, and foods that possess these opposite qualities.

Opposites in Diet as Medicine

A Kapha individual does well to have a moderate amount of warming, light, freshly cooked foods to maintain balance.

Because pungent, bitter and astringent tastes decrease Kapha, these tastes should be predominant in your diet.

Opposites in Climate and Lifestyle as Medicine

Although Kapha may be able to tolerate a wide variety of temperatures, the ideal environment is a warm and dry one. Active sports like jogging, hiking, biking or competitive sports, especially in the morning, are best. Aromatic, invigorating or heating scents, like essential oils of hina or myrrh and light and lively music are also good "medicines" for Kapha. A vigorous, 10-20 minute self-massage, several times a week, with warm sesame, or even better, Kapha-pacifying herbal oil will help keep Kapha from becoming stagnant.

One of the best medicines for Kapha is activity. It is well worth the effort for the Kapha individual to find that golden key to what motivates them. For example, if you have a difficult time motivating yourself to exercise regularly, you could enter yourself in a local bike race. This may give you just that extra push and you may be surprised by how much you enjoy yourself.

Famous Kapha Examples

Oprah Winfrey: Large, luminescent eyes and frame. Compassionate. Generous.

Luciano Pavarotti: Deep, resonant voice. Large frame.

Simple Guidelines For Decreasing Kapha

If your Kapha is elevated, you may be experiencing some of the following signs or symptoms:

- excess mucous
- thick, white tongue coat
- slow, sticky, sluggish bowel movements
- high body weight
- difficulty rising in the morning
- feeling slow, foggy, dull, lethargic or heavy
- easily attached or possessive
- overly sentimental
- complacent or stubborn
- tendency for "emotional overeating"

To reduce or pacify Kapha, Ayurveda has given us dietary, lifestyle and herbal treatment strategies. Here are a few underlying concepts that these strategies are based on:

- Stimulation
- Exercise
- Lightening
- Warming
- Drying

Kapha-Pacifying Diet:

General Guidelines:

Enjoy:

- Pungent (spicy), bitter or astringent foods.
- Heating spices - like chili, black or cayenne pepper, ginger, cinnamon and cumin.
- Whole, freshly cooked foods.
- Light, dry and warm foods.
- Honey over any other kind of sweetener, but do not eat cooked honey, as it is considered toxic, according to Ayurveda.
- Only room temperature or warm drinks.
- Most beans. Mung dahl, well-cooked tofu or tempeh or warm soy milk are all ok.
- Lots of veggies.
- A minimal amount of high-quality corn, canola, sesame, sunflower oil or ghee in your daily diet.
- Routine times for your meals.
- Taking a deep breath after swallowing your last bite and heading off for your next activity.
- Eating your meal in a peaceful environment.

Avoid:

- Sweet (except honey, which is fine), sour and/or salty foods.
- Cold foods.
- Heavy and oily foods (e.g. cheese, pudding, nuts, cake).
- Highly processed foods (e.g. canned or frozen foods, "TV" dinners or pastries).
- Cold or carbonated drinks.
- Overeating or eating heavy meals.
- Eating fresh fruit or drinking fruit juice within 1/2 hr of any other food.
- Red meat.
- Foods or drinks that contain refined sugar or corn syrup.
- Deep fried foods.
- Alcohol, except for an occasional glass of dry red or white wine.
- Eating when upset, bored or not truly hungry.

Kapha-Pacifying-Lifestyle:

General Guidelines:

Enjoy:

- An energetic routine. Avoid stagnation.
- Stimulating your body and mind on a daily basis.
- A 10-20 min. vigorous self-massage (*abhyanga*), several times a week, with 1/2 c. warm, Kapha-pacifying oil. See the abhyanga article at: <http://satyaayurveda.org/index.html> for complete directions.
- A vigorous exercise routine that includes jogging, hiking, biking, vigorous forms of yoga or martial arts or other challenging forms of exercise, a minimum of five times per week.
- Keeping warm and dry, no matter what the weather.
- Lively and invigorating music, smells, experiences and company.

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