



AYURVEDA

A brief history of Ayurvedic medicine

Ayurveda is a system of healing from India, where it has been practised for at least 5,000 years. Ayurveda is usually translated as “the science of life.” As a medical system, it includes herbal medicines, dietary therapies, physical therapies, as well as psychological and spiritual healing.

Over the centuries, Ayurveda spread east and west and influenced many systems of medicine. In Greece, it influenced the development of ancient Greek medicine and the concept of the four “humours” (fluids believed to circulate in the body, i.e., blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile). Ayurveda was adopted by early Buddhists, and as Buddhism flourished, Ayurveda influenced the development of medicine in Tibet, Sri Lanka, Burma, and China. In a way, Ayurveda is the distant ancestor of both Western and Chinese systems of medicine.

Principles of Ayurveda

At the root of Ayurveda is the connection between the macrocosm and the microcosm. The universe, or cosmos, is made up of five elements: earth, air, fire, water, and space (or ether). Human beings are composed of those same elements; thus we are a micro-version of the universe itself.

These five elements interact and, in humans, they occur as the three *doshas* (*vata*, *pitta*, and *kapha*). When the *doshas* (or humours) are in harmony, health and well-being are maintained.

When the *doshas* are out of balance, the body does not function properly, and disease will follow. Although all three *doshas* are present in each human being, one usually predominates. The exception is *tridosha*, in which all three *doshas* are balanced.

Vata means “wind” and this *dosha* is composed of the elements air and space. Disruptions in *vata* occur as gas, and muscular or nervous energy leading to pain. *Vata* is located in the brain, heart, ears, bones, lungs, thighs, and colon.

Pitta means “bile” and this *dosha* is composed of the elements fire and water. Disruptions in *pitta* occur as acid and bile, leading to inflammation. *Pitta* is located in the liver, spleen, sweat glands, stomach, endocrine glands, small intestine, blood, lymph system, and eyes.

Kapha means “phlegm” and this *dosha* is composed of the elements earth and water. Disruptions in *kapha* occur as liquid and mucus, which lead to swelling and sometimes discharge. *Kapha* is located in the head, nose, mouth, joints, tongue, throat, lymph system, fat, and stomach.

There are seven *dhatu*s or tissues of the body that build and sustain it. *Rasa* includes plasma and lymph; *rakta* is blood; *mamsa* is muscle; *medas* is fat; *asthi* is bone; *majja* is bone marrow; and *shukra* is semen and sexual fluids.

The three *malas* are the body’s waste products: sweat, urine, and feces. These must be eliminated regularly from the body. The buildup of *malas* can lead to disease.



The *srotas* are the sixteen channels of the body through which all substances circulate. Blockage of *srotas* can cause a variety of diseases.

The *agnis* are enzymes that assist in the digestion of food and in nurturing the body.

Causes of illness

Disease or illness may result from physical causes, including imbalances in the body's humours, elements, or energies. Treatment for physically caused illnesses can involve herbal medicines, dietary changes, physical therapy, massage, yoga, *Pancha Karma*, and breathing techniques.

Other illnesses may be a result of karmic causes: the effects of the incomplete areas from this life or previous lives. These are spiritual or psychological ills that may require spiritual healing through meditation, mantras, and prayers and changes in lifestyle and attitude.

Diagnosis

After an interview and a discussion of the patient's problem, an Ayurvedic practitioner uses three main techniques to assess a patient and arrive at a diagnosis.

1. The practitioner takes the patient's pulse to find out which *dosha* is dominant or is out of balance. Pulse examination is a specialized art, and the practitioner may take a patient's pulse several times in one day to get an accurate reading.
2. The patient's first urine of the morning is studied. The practitioner notes the colour and transparency, and how the sample reacts when a small drop of oil is added. These tests show which *dosha* is involved in the patient's illness.
3. A careful physical examination of the patient is made. The practitioner notes the condition of the tongue, nails, and skin to determine which *dosha* is affected.

Treatment

Ayurveda recognizes and stresses the role of individuals in taking care of themselves.

Although Ayurveda is a highly complex system of healing, there are two main approaches to treatment. The first is to maintain good health and prevent illness, and the second is to treat illness and restore good health.

In treating an illness, the Ayurvedic practitioner aims to eliminate the root cause rather than to relieve symptoms. If the illness has been allowed to progress, stronger herbal prescriptions may be needed for longer periods, or surgery may be necessary, along with diet and lifestyle changes.

Ayurveda and HIV

In North America, Ayurveda has not been widely used by people living with HIV. The aim of a balanced lifestyle with dietary changes, yoga, and meditation may have good results for people with HIV/AIDS. Ayurveda remains the main healing system for millions of people in India, where Ayurvedic practitioners are treating more and more HIV-positive patients. As their experience grows, Ayurvedic practitioners will be able to share their knowledge with their colleagues around the world.

Finding a practitioner

In Toronto, a consultation with an Ayurvedic practitioner costs about \$40 to \$80. People with chronic illnesses may need regular visits with a practitioner. For help finding a practitioner in your area, contact

Ayurvedic Medical Association of Canada
102-1 Gloucester St.
Toronto, ON M4Y 1L8
(416) 967-6891
(416) 922-2287 (fax)
althealth@followme.com
President, Bruce Ally, Ph.D.

With its emphasis on prevention and self-awareness, Ayurveda is often referred to as a method of self-healing. It is an approach to health maintenance that can be studied and practised by the individual. Correspondence courses in Ayurveda are available through The Ayurvedic Institute, PO Box 23445, Albuquerque, New Mexico. (505) 291-9698; fax (505) 294-7572.



Credits

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Further reading

Chopra D. **Perfect health-The complete mind body guide.** New York: Harmony Books, 1991.

Frawley D. **Ayurvedic Healing. A comprehensive guide.** Passage Press. Salt Lake City, Utah. 1989.

Joshi S, Joshi S. **Ayurvedic Medicine.** Lawrence University; WI. Winter 1996.

Lad V. **The complete book of Ayurvedic home remedies.**

Svoboda R. **Ayurveda, life, health, and longevity.**

www.interlog.com/~akash/: This Web page details one person's experiences with living with HIV and taking a holistic approach to maintaining his health and well-being. In addition to the author's own history and treatment protocols, the site delivers an abundance of information about complementary therapies, particularly those of Asian origin. An extensive selection of pointers to other published resources and Web sites is also offered.

Disclaimer

Decisions about particular medical treatments should always be made in consultation with a qualified medical practitioner knowledgeable about HIV-related illness and the treatments in question.

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