

Ayurveda

Ayurveda is an ancient healing system from India that dates back some 5,000 years or more. It encompasses a wide range of techniques to treat illness and encourage general wellbeing, including:

- Herbs
- Yoga
- Acupuncture, also called marmapuncture
- Diet
- Breathing exercises
- Massage.

Translated from Sanskrit, Ayurveda means 'the science of life'. The central philosophy is that the mind and body are one and the same, and that physical health can't be achieved without emotional, mental and spiritual health.

Since Ayurveda is only now gaining some popularity in the West, the number of scientific studies has been small. From the evidence so far, it seems that the Ayurvedic approach can be effective in treating a number of disorders, including digestive problems and allergies.

A range of disorders

Ayurveda can be used to treat a range of disorders, including:

- Anxiety
- Digestive problems
- Eczema
- High blood pressure
- High cholesterol levels
- Rheumatoid arthritis
- Stress.

The five elements and doshas

According to Ayurveda, the five elements that make up everything in the universe are earth, water, fire, air and ether. Each element is represented in the human body. For instance, bones and teeth are earth, blood and lymph are water, the metabolism is fire, oxygen is air, and ether is the spaces found between matter and represented best by vibration or sound. These five elements pair up to form three forces, or 'doshas', within the body:

- **Vata** – made up of air and ether. Responsible for such functions as the heartbeat, locomotion and the workings of the nervous system. Too much Vata can lead to symptoms such as high blood pressure, while too little can result in constipation.
- **Pitta** – made up of fire and water. Responsible for such functions as digestion and temperature. Too much Pitta can lead to symptoms such as ulcers and acne, while too little can result in indigestion.
- **Kapha** – made up of water and earth. Responsible for such functions as immunity. Too much Kapha can lead to symptoms such as a runny nose or productive cough, while too little can result in poor concentration.

An individual blend of doshas

Each person has an individual blend of the three doshas, with one or sometimes two doshas predominating. Someone who is mainly a Vata type will be creative and nervous; a Pitta type, confident and competitive; and a Kapha type will be patient and possessive. A person's dosha balance can be upset by a variety of factors including diet, stress, emotional upset and the weather.

Doshas and their effect on prana

An Ayurvedic practitioner aims to balance the patient's doshas in order to increase their life energy, or 'prana'. Only then is good health possible. We take up prana from the food we eat and the air we breathe. Food can affect a person's dosha levels because food is also made up of the five basic elements and can be predominantly Vata, Pitta or Kapha.

A range of therapies

An Ayurvedic practitioner uses a range of healing therapies to balance the doshas and bolster prana, including:

- Aromatherapy
- Dietary therapy
- Herbal medicine
- Acupuncture (practiced by some practitioners)
- Massage
- Meditation
- Pancha karma ('five therapies') – a specialised treatment consisting of five therapies resulting in internal detoxification and balancing of the doshas or the three energies (Vata, Pitta and Kapha)
- Sound therapy, or the use of mantras
- Yoga.

Special considerations

Herbal medicines can be as potent as pharmaceutical drugs and should be treated with the same caution and respect. Never stop taking your conventional medicine or alter the dose without the knowledge and approval of your doctor.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Ayurvedic practitioner
- Australasian Ayurvedic Practitioners Association Tel. (07) 5531 1141

Things to remember

- Ayurveda is an ancient Indian healing system that has been developing over the past 5,000 years.
- Illness is believed to be caused by an imbalance of the body's three vital forces, or 'doshas'.
- Treatment options are varied and can include yoga, acupuncture, herbal medicine, massage therapy and dietary changes.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

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