

## Eating with Awareness

Digestion is one of three processes by which food becomes part of our body. Through digestion, the food we eat is softened and broken down into a form that's soluble. The most important factor in proper digestion is whether or not food has been properly alkalised before it reaches the stomach. This can be achieved partly through proper chewing, which releases the appropriate digestive juices in the stomach, duodenum and small intestine, but also through eating with awareness.

The ancient Indian science of Ayurveda addresses the subject of food in great depth. Fine details of how a meal is prepared are of the utmost importance, including not only the food but also the people preparing the food as well as where and how the food is made, served and eaten. As these aspects have a significant effect on our body and mind, they're approached with an attitude of reverence.

Ayurvedically speaking, not just anyone can enter or work in the kitchen. Those who work in the kitchen are tested for good behaviour. The manager of the kitchen and the cook must have certain virtuous qualities of character (for example, compassion for others) and must be thoroughly knowledgeable and trained in the science and art of cooking. It's believed that the cook's state of mind while he or she is cooking becomes part of the food. As the diner digests not only the cook's food but their state of consciousness, it's important that cooks are cheerful and uplifted.

Before food is served, a portion of it is offered to the gods and blessed with certain mantras and Sanskrit prayers. People serving the food should not only be clean and dressed neatly but should also smell pleasant so that no bad smells interfere with the good aromas of the food.

Ayurveda suggests that healthy eating means eating according to place, time and your individual constitution:

### Eating according to place

Climatic conditions and geographical location should be taken into consideration. The food you require when in the mountains is different from that which you need when near the sea or in the desert. When we change locations, we should change our diet accordingly. When moving from a cold to a warm country, less food is needed. In hot weather, the body usually requires a more liquid diet, lighter food, less cheese and more fruits and salad.

### Your individual constitution

Ayurveda suggests we are made up of three elements: pitta (fire), vata (air) and kapha (water). Usually, we're a combination of two of these, with one dominant element. Eating in harmony with your individual constitution means you will avoid over-eating certain foods, avoid others altogether and increase the intake of those foods that help to keep the energy in your body balanced. If, for example, you are predominantly pitta, you would be advised to avoid pitta-dominating foods, such as red meat, hot spicy food, alcohol, tomatoes and raw onions.

## Where and how

Have you noticed the speed with which you eat when you are in a quiet and peaceful environment? Our environment affects the depth of our awareness. Ayurveda suggests food should be taken in a quiet and peaceful environment, either in silence or with soft background music. Food should be eaten neither too quickly nor too slowly. Eating slowly brings more harmony into our lives, but be aware that eating should not be a long, drawn-out affair, either. Eating too quickly creates restlessness in our body and mind. If we can increase the quality of awareness we give to eating, digestion naturally becomes smoother and stronger.

## Time

Many of us are conditioned to eat our meals at set times of the day. While this is not necessarily a bad thing, we could deepen our awareness of the frequency and amount of food we eat. Some meals take longer to be digested than others but were not always sensitive to this. Food should be eaten only when previous food has been fully digested, no sooner than three hours after the previous meal, no later than six. This is so the agni (digestive fire) in the body will be at its strongest during eating.

## How much should we eat?

Conscious awareness of the quantity of food we ingest at any single sitting is essential for the maintenance of positive health. Food is not just nourishment for the body; its medicine for the body, mind and spirit and eating too much destroys this healing opportunity. Similarly, eating too little affects our appetite adversely, diminishing our agni and weakening our digestive system. If you need to reduce the amount of food you eat, do so gradually, giving your body time to adjust to the changes.

## What

The food we eat affects not only our digestion but also our state of mind and emotions. Food that is heavy and takes a long time to digest, such as meat, makes the mind dull and heavy. Have you noticed how you feel after eating a large salad? Fresh foods contain more energy than foods that are overcooked, stale or processed, and leave you feeling energised rather than dull and sleepy. However, too much salad and not enough of other types of foods can leave you feeling lightheaded and may cause sleep disturbance.

Some Ayurvedic guidelines to eating:

- \* Don't eat before sunrise or after sunset.
- \* Meditate briefly before eating.
- \* Avoid drinks that are too hot or cold.
- \* Eat only when you are hungry.

- \* Avoid snacking between meals.
- \* Avoid reheated foods.
- \* Allow two hours after eating before sleeping.
- \* Wash your hands, mouth and eyes after eating.
- \* Do not drink during a meal.

## Yoga for digestion

If the food you eat is, for one reason or another, not digesting well in your system, what can you do apart from taking laxatives? Here are some excellent yoga asanas or poses for aiding the digestive system. Remember, the asanas are not a quick fix for digestive disorders, but need to be practised regularly if the benefits are to be felt.

### Poorna Dhanurasana (Bow pose)

Lie on your stomach. Bend your knees and bring your feet towards your buttocks until you can take hold of your feet. Take a deep breath in as you lift your head, looking forward. At the same time, raise your feet as high as you can, still keeping hold of them. Breathe deeply through your nose for 20-30 seconds. Whenever you exhale, exhale completely until there is no more air in your lungs. This asana gives the internal organs a chance to be massaged. Finally, relax downwards as you breathe out. Rest on your stomach with your legs straight and your head to one side, arms by the side of your body, palms facing towards the sky.

Relaxing deeply after doing the bow pose is essential if the benefits are to be fully absorbed into the body. Poorna Dhanurasana is said to affect most of the endocrine glands, stimulating the thyroid, thymus, liver, kidneys, spleen and pancreas. The pose effectively releases blockages in the abdominal area, pressing acupuncture points near the stomach. It has been used for thousands of years as a constipation-relieving pose.

### Vajrasana (Thunderbolt pose)

Kneel on the floor with your buttocks resting on your heels. Keep your big toes together and move your heels as far apart as you can. Rest your hands on your knees, palms facing upwards. Keep your head level and your spine straight but relaxed. Make sure there's minimal arching in your lower back. Close your eyes and relax your body. Allow your breath to be normal. Keep your attention on your breath, observing the inhalation and exhalation as they come and go. Sit in this position for at least five minutes, or for as long as you can, progressively increasing the time during each practice. If your knees become sore, shake your legs out in front of you and then move back into the posture. For extra comfort, place a small blanket or towel between your buttocks and your heels.

Sitting in Vajrasana for a few minutes after a meal promotes strong digestion. This asana activates various acupuncture points on the tops of the feet that promote strong digestion. Meridians of various digestive organs including the stomach, spleen-pancreas, liver and gall bladder all pass through this area.

## Supta Vajrasana (Reclining Thunderbolt pose)

Stage one: From Vajrasana, you can either keep your heels under your buttocks or move them to the side of your body so your buttocks are on the ground. Slowly start to walk your hands behind and away from your body, gradually lowering your torso towards the ground. Find that space in which you can feel the stretch and then hold the position, supporting your body with either your hands or elbows. If your elbows don't reach the ground, place your hands on the floor with your fingers pointing away from your body. Then gently take your head backwards, relaxing your neck completely.

Stage two: If possible, relax your body all the way down to the ground so your back is flat against the ground and your head relaxed. If it's more comfortable, separate your knees slightly. You can either relax your hands with your palms facing downwards on your thighs or you can stretch your arms above your head and interlock your fingers. Finally, close your eyes and breathe deeply and slowly.

Start with practising Supta Vajrasana for up to one minute, building up gradually at your own pace. When you move out of Supta Vajrasana, use your elbows and hands to lift yourself up and then unfold your legs. Once you are back in Vajrasana, relax forwards into the Child's pose, with your forehead resting on the ground. Supta Vajrasana allows your abdominal organs to be deeply massaged and can provide great relief for constipation.

## Supta Pawanmuktasana (Wind-Relieving pose)

Lie on your back and bring your knees up towards your chest. Take hold of one wrist with the other hand and wrap your arms around your legs. Slowly lift your head off the ground, taking your nose between your knees. Place your nose between your knees. Hold this position for five deep breaths, breathing deeply and slowly. Before lowering your head, take a deep breath in and then relax down on the exhalation. Repeat three times.

This pose helps to open up the rectum so that excess gas in the body can be expelled. It also activates pressure points on the stomach and the large intestine, helping to improve overall digestion. Supta Pawanmuktasana is especially recommended for constipation. Don't practise this asana if you have a slipped disc.

## Fasting

Fasting is an ancient practice to ease the burden on the gastrointestinal tract so the available energy can be used to eliminate waste from deep within the cells and rekindle the digestive fire. When food is not given to the body, despite the strong digestive fire that is burning, toxins that have been in the body for a long time are slowly burnt away.

As we are accustomed to feeding our bodies two or three times a day, often more than it needs, we tend to think of fasting for a day as starvation, but the body can go days without food. Fasting also gets rid of the uneliminated faeces in the bowel, which otherwise poisons the entire system and can lead to health problems.

Fasting has been referred to as a key to mental and spiritual evolution. Clarity of mind, expansion of consciousness and acute extrasensory instinct become more intense during a period of fasting, attuning us to nature and increasing energy.

Initially, a prolonged fast should not be undertaken without skilled supervision. First, you need to understand how to fast sensibly. Many people decide to fast without first looking at their individual constitution. People who fast for 10 to 20 days can sometimes be doing more harm than good to themselves if they haven't considered their constitution.

Ayurveda recommends that a person who is predominantly vata (air) should not fast for more than three days, otherwise they may increase the air in their body, creating an imbalance and provoking emotions such as fear, anxiety and weakness. A person of pitta (fire) constitution should abide by the same restriction. As pitta people have a high element of fire in their bodies, too long a fast increases the fire element and can cause psychological and physical reactions such as dizziness and emotions of anger and hatred. Someone of kapha (water and earth) constitution, however, can fast for a long period of time and will experience increased lightness, greater awareness and clarity.

It's important when fasting to observe yourself closely. If your body is becoming weak and your stamina is decreasing significantly, the fast should be stopped. Fasting is highly recommended as a monthly practice, even for just one day, but is especially beneficial if you have fever, constipation or arthritic pain.

#### Spices

Spices to include in cooking to increase the digestive fire include cumin and ginger. Cumin not only promotes digestion but is rich in various vitamins and minerals and great for curing weakness and fatigue. Ginger is wonderful for promoting digestive power.

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