
Ayurvedic Medicine

What is Ayurvedic medicine?

Ayurveda means “science of life.” Ayurveda or Ayurvedic medicine began in India. It has been in use for over 4,000 years. It is a whole medical system, which has evolved separately from modern medicine. It considers the body in its entirety.

Ayurvedic medicine was developed over many years by monks and rishis. (Rishis are poets inspired by a higher power or sages found in India). They observed how life changes due to the effects of herbs and their own diet. These observations were written into a text known as the AyurVeda. Over the last 40 years, many original texts have been translated into English. This has led to the growing popularity of Ayurvedic medicine in Western countries.

Ayurvedic medicine focuses on each patient as an individual. It considers all levels of the individual: physical, social, psychological, spiritual, intellectual, behavioral, familial, and environmental. It offers natural ways to treat disease and promote health. Ayurvedic medicine uses herbs, diet, massage, and lifestyle changes to achieve a balance between body, mind and spirit. Thus, it focuses on prevention and empowers people to take responsibility of their own health and well-being.

How does Ayurvedic medicine compare to modern (allopathic) medicine?

Modern medicine describes the body in systems. Clinicians talk about the cardiovascular system, the neurological, system, etc.). In contrast, Ayurveda considers how the mind, body and spirit are connected. It is, therefore, a holistic approach.

How is Ayurvedic medicine used today?

In India, 80% of the population uses it alone or along with modern medicine. In the United States, a survey done in 2007 showed that over 200,000 people had used Ayurvedic medicine in the last year. Research continues both in India and the United States on Ayurvedic treatments.

What are the main ideas behind Ayurvedic medicine?

In order to understand Ayurvedic medicine, it is important to learn about its three main ideas. These ideas have to do with universal interconnectedness (i.e., how all things in the universe are connected), the body's constitution (*prakriti*), and life forces (*doshas*).

- **Interconnectedness.** Ayurvedic practitioners think about relationships among people, their health, and the universe. Disease is thought to occur when a person is out of harmony (either physical, emotional or spiritual) with her/his environment.
- **Constitution (*prakriti*).** Constitution refers to a person's general health, the likelihood of becoming out of balance, and the ability to resist and recover from health problems. Each person's constitution has a unique combination of physical and psychological features. These affect the way the body functions to maintain health. Digestion and how the body deals with waste products are very important in the balance.



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- **Life forces (doshas).** The *prakriti* includes three important life forces, or energies, called *doshas*. The three *doshas* are known by their original Sanskrit names: *vata*, *pitta*, and *kapha*. Ayurvedic medicine views the *doshas* in the following ways:
 - Each *dosha* is made up of two basic elements out of the following five: 1) ether (the upper regions of space), 2) air, 3) fire, 4) water, and 5) earth.
 - Each *dosha* has a particular relationship to bodily functions and can be upset for different reasons.
 - Each person has a unique combination of the three *doshas*. One *dosha*, however, is usually more dominant. *Doshas* are constantly being formed and reformed by food, activity, and bodily processes.
 - Each *dosha* has its own physical and psychological features.
 - An imbalance of a *dosha* will produce symptoms that are unique to that *dosha*. Imbalances may be caused by a person's age, unhealthy lifestyle or diet, too much or too little mental and physical exertion, the seasons, or inadequate protection from the weather, chemicals, or germs.

Attributes	Vata	Pitta	Kapha
Represents the element	Air Space (ether)	Fire Water	Earth Water
Qualities	Dry/Cold Light body type Quick/Energetic	Hot/Moist Perfectionistic Sharp/Intelligent	Steady/Calm Heavier body type Strong/Loyal
Body process	Cell division Heart Breathing Waste products Mind	Digestion Temperature Hormones	Structure Growth Storage
Major mental functions	Imagination Resilience Decision making	Intelligence Confidence Enterprise	Memory Tranquility Devotion

What happens in Ayurvedic Treatment?

- **Gathering information and creating a plan.** An Ayurvedic practitioner will ask questions about a person's diet, behavior, lifestyle, illnesses, ability to recover from illness, and physical characteristics. This information will help determine that person's *dosha* balance. The practitioner will then use her/his knowledge of the *doshas* to create an individualized plan for nutrition, exercise and activities that suits that person's constitution. This changes over time, and takes into account the different seasons of the year and a person's stage in the life cycle.

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- **Treatment goals and methods.** Ayurvedic treatment goals include eliminating impurities, reducing symptoms, increasing resistance to disease, reducing worry, and increasing harmony in the patient's life. The practitioner uses a variety of methods to achieve these goals. These include herbal supplements, massage, oils, physical exercises, breathing exercises, and meditation.
- **Use of plants.** Ayurvedic treatments often use herbs and other plants—including oils and common spices. More than 600 herbal formulas and 250 single plant drugs are included in the "pharmacy" of Ayurvedic treatments. Sometimes, plants are mixed with metals or other substances found in nature to make formulas. The formulas are prepared according to specific Ayurvedic procedures.

How is an Ayurvedic practitioner trained?

Many practitioners study in India, where training can take five years or longer. Students who receive their Ayurvedic training in India can earn either a bachelor's degree (Bachelor of Ayurvedic Medicine and Surgery, BAMS) or doctoral degree (Doctor of Ayurvedic Medicine and Surgery, DAMS).

The United States has no national standard for training or certifying Ayurvedic practitioners. However, a few states have approved Ayurvedic schools as educational institutions. There are programs to become a Certified Ayurvedic Practitioner, but requirements vary greatly.

What are some concerns about Ayurvedic medications?

If you are considering using Ayurvedic medication, it is good to be aware of the following concerns:

- **Toxicity.** Ayurvedic medications can be toxic (poisonous). Many have not been thoroughly studied. Also, they are not regulated as are western medications. So, they can contain harmful ingredients.
- **Formulations.** Most Ayurvedic medications are a combination of herbs and other medicines. It is hard to know which are helpful and why they are helpful.
- **Interactions.** Whenever two or more medications are used together, it is possible for them to interact with each other. As a result, the medications could be either less helpful or more helpful than if they were used alone.
- **Scientific evidence.** There have been few high quality studies done on Ayurvedic approaches. Therefore, scientific evidence on Ayurvedic practices varies. More careful research is needed to determine which practices are safe and effective.

The key to safe and effective treatment is to find a reliable practitioner. This specialist will guide your treatment and help identify brands that contain the ingredients listed on their labels.



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Always consider:

- Tell your health care providers about any complementary and alternative (CAM) practices you use, including Ayurvedic medicine. Give them a full picture of what you do to manage your health. This will help to ensure coordinated and safe care. For tips on talking with your health care providers about CAM, see the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine's "Time to Talk" campaign at <http://nccam.nih.gov/timetotalk>.
- Women who are pregnant or nursing, or people who are thinking of using Ayurvedic therapy to treat a child, should be especially sure to consult their health care providers.
- It is important to make sure that any diagnosis of a disease or condition has been made by a provider who has substantial medical training and experience with managing that disease or condition.
- It is better to use Ayurvedic remedies under the supervision of an Ayurvedic medicine practitioner than to try to treat yourself.
- Before using Ayurvedic treatment, ask about the practitioner's training and experience.
- Ask for information about the brands for any Ayurvedic medication prescribed. Also ask about possible benefits and harms of this medication.

References:

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The information in this handout is for general education. It is not meant to be used by a patient alone. Please work with your health care practitioner to use this information in the best way possible to promote your health.

This handout was created by Ritu Bhatnagar, MD, MPH, Resident Psychiatrist, University of Wisconsin Hospital and Clinics, Madison, Wisconsin. *Date Created: January 2011*

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