

A Holistic Perspective on Nutrition: An Integrated Review of Ayurvedic and Modern Dietary Science

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Abstract:

Ayurveda, the ancient science of life, accords *Aahara* (diet) the status of a fundamental pillar (*Upastambha*), essential for sustaining health and preventing disease. The classical objectives-*Swasthasya Swasthya Rakshanam* (preservation of health) and *Aturasya Vikara Prashmanam* (management of disease)-highlight diet as both preventive and therapeutic. Dietary principles are framed around *Prakriti* (constitution), *Agni* (digestive fire), *Ritu* (season), *Desha* (habitat), and *Satmya* (adaptation), underscoring the personalised and context-specific nature of nutrition.

Modern nutritional science, though primarily reductionist in its focus on nutrients, metabolism, and caloric balance, increasingly recognises the importance of diet quality, seasonality, gut health, and individualised nutrition. This convergence echoes Ayurveda's holistic perspective, where food is not only sustenance but also medicine (*Mahabhaishajya*).

This review explores classical Ayurvedic dietary concepts-including *Pathya–Apathya* (wholesome and unwholesome foods), *Shadrasa* (six tastes), *Ahara Vidhi Visheshayatana* (rules of eating), *Viruddhahara* (food incompatibilities), *Dvadasha Ashana Pravicharana* (twelve dietary considerations), and the mind-diet connection (*Sattvic, Rajasic and Tamasic* foods) in the light of contemporary nutritional research. Emphasis is placed on digestion (*Agni*), metabolic regulation, and lifestyle-associated disorders such as obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease.

By integrating the preventive, personalised, and holistic framework of Ayurveda with evidence-based nutritional science, a more comprehensive model of dietary health emerges. Such an approach offers sustainable strategies for health promotion, disease prevention, and restoration of balance between body, mind, and environment, thereby bridging timeless wisdom with modern science.

Keywords: Aahara, Aaharvidhi Visheshayatana, Dosha, Mahabhaishajya, Pathya

Introduction:

Ayurveda, the ancient science of life, regards *Aahara* (diet) as one of the fundamental pillars of health (*Upastambha*), alongside *Nidra* (sleep) and *Brahmacharya* (regulated conduct)^[1]. *Aahara* encompasses not just the act of consuming food but also includes the techniques used in its preparation, the specific timing of meals, and the mental state one adopts while eating. Its dietary principles are highly

individualised, determined by *Prakriti* (constitution), *Agni* (digestive capacity), *Ritu* (season), and *Desha-Kala* (environment and time). The core objectives-*Swasthasya Swasthya Rakshanam* (preservation of health in the healthy) and *Aturasya Vikara Prashmanam*^[2] (management of disease in the ailing)-highlight diet as both sustenance and medicine, central to the promotion of balance, strength, and longevity.

Modern nutritional science, though rooted in a reductionist analysis of nutrients and metabolism, echoes these principles in contemporary contexts. Poor dietary habits and lifestyle disruptions-excessive intake of processed foods, irregular eating, and neglect of mindful consumption-are now recognised as major contributors to non-communicable diseases such as type 2 diabetes^[3], obesity, and cardiovascular disorders. While modern science provides detailed biochemical insights, Ayurveda offers a preventive and holistic framework. Integrating these perspectives creates a more comprehensive approach to nutrition, uniting traditional wisdom with evidence-based understanding for sustainable health and well-being.

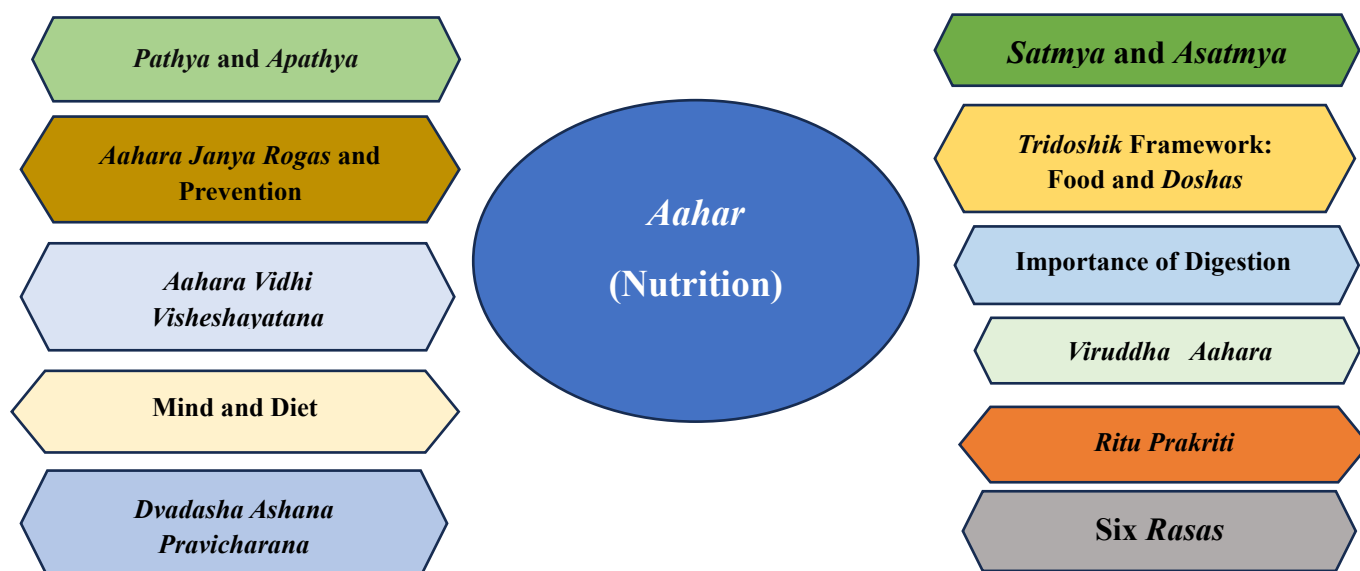
Materials and Methods

This review integrates information from classical Ayurvedic texts, including the *Charaka Samhita* and *Sushruta Samhita*, with modern scientific literature on nutrition, metabolism, and lifestyle diseases. The methodology involves a comparative analysis of key concepts.

Results and Discussion

Ayurveda posits that food is the primary source of health and disease. The principles of *Aahar* are not rigid rules but dynamic guidelines that adapt to the individual's unique needs^[4].

Fig 1: (Various) Dimensions of Aahara



1.The Qualities of Food: Pathya and Apathya

In Ayurveda, *Pathya* (wholesome) and *Apathya* (unwholesome) form the foundation of dietary guidance. *Pathya* foods are easily digestible and maintain balance, while *Apathya* foods generate toxins (*Ama*) and disturb metabolism. Their classification is individualised, depending on one's constitution (*Prakriti*), time, quantity and preparation.

Acharyas gave prime importance to *Pathya*. *Charak* even equated it with treatment, as it clears channels (*Srotasa*) and pacifies *Doshas*^[5]. *Sushruta* dedicated an entire chapter (*Hita-Ahitiya*)^[6]. *Kashyap* declared

food as the best medicine,^[7] and *Bhela* highlighted that *Pathya* nourishes *Dhatus*, whereas *Apathya* vitiates *Doshas*^[8].

Applications:

Seasonal: Specific *Pathya-Apathya* are advised in each season for health promotion.^[9]

General: Foods like *Shashtika* (rice), *Mudga*, *Saindhava* (Pink salt), *Amalki*, *Yava* (Barley), *Antariksha jala*, *Paya* (Milk), *Sarpi* (Ghee), *Jangala Mamsa*,^[10] grapes, and pomegranate are universally beneficial.

Avoidable: Dried meats (*Vallura*), *Shuska Shaka* (Dried and Frozen Vegetables), *Shaluka*, *Bisa*, *Kurchika-kilata*, *mansa of Shaukar*, *Gavya*, *Mahisha* and *Matsya*, *Dadhi* (Curd), *Masha* (Black gram), *Yavak*, diseased animal products, and stale foods are generally unwholesome^[11].

Irrespective of disease: Ginger with salt before a meal is always recommended to enhance *Agni*^[12].

Thus, *Pathya* and *Apathya* guide not just food choices but also lifestyle, serving as timeless principles for maintaining health and preventing disease.

2. The *Tridoshik* Framework: Food and *Doshas*

Ayurveda classifies individuals into three primary psychophysiological constitutions, or *Doshas-Vata*, *Pitta*, and *Kapha*-each with unique dietary requirements.

Vata - benefit from warm, oily, grounding foods; avoid astringent, bitter, pungent^[13].

Pitta -benefit from cooling, mild, sweet foods; avoid pungent, sour, salty^[14].

Kapha - benefit from light, warm, dry foods; avoid sweet, sour and salty^[15].

3.The Six *Rasas* (Tastes) and Their Physiological Impact

'*Rasa*' is the Arabic term for flavour and sensation of the tongue^[16], Ayurveda emphasises the inclusion of all six *Rasas* in each meal to ensure a balanced physiological effect^[17] and each taste has a specific action on the *Doshas* and bodily tissues.

1. *Madhura* (Sweet): Promotes strength, growth, skin, and senses; excess causes obesity and diabetes^[18].
2. *Amla* (Sour): Enhances digestion, heart health, and appetite; excess leads to weakness, oedema, and vision problems^[19].
3. *Lavana* (Salty): Improves taste, digestion, and tissue absorption; the best form is *Saindhava Lavana*; excess causes imbalance^[20].
4. *Katu* (Pungent): Treats skin and throat disorders, improves circulation and clarity; excess causes thirst, tremors, and weakness^[21].
5. *Tikta* (Bitter): Detoxifies, reduces inflammation, and treats skin and nausea; excess leads to dryness and tissue weakness^[22].
6. *Kashaya* (Astringent): Heals wounds, reduces bleeding, cleanses blood; excess causes dryness, constipation, and heart discomfort^[23].

4. *Satmya* and *Asatmya*: Adaptation and Intolerance^[24]

In Ayurveda, *Satmya* (*Upashaya*) refers to substances, foods, or habits that are congenial and beneficial to an individual's body and mind. Suitability depends on factors such as region (*Desha*), season (*Kala/Ritu*), genetics (*Jati*), climate, disease condition, exercise, water intake, day sleep, and taste (*Rasa*). Its opposite, *Asatmya* denotes non-suitability, which may cause adverse effects such as allergies or intolerance. This principle resonates with modern science, where genetics, environment, and the gut microbiome influence dietary and lifestyle responses.

Classical texts describe *Satmya* in detail. *Charaka Samhita* explains that constant use of certain foods or tastes makes them congenial, even if ordinarily unwholesome. *Sushruta* also emphasises *Satmya* in determining dietary compatibility, highlighting its importance for strength, immunity, and longevity.

Two main types are identified: *Aajanmya Satmya* (inherent) which develops naturally from birth (e.g., continuous intake of a particular food or taste), and *Okasatmya* (habitual), which arises from long-term, consistent use. Based on habituation to tastes (*Rasa*), *Satmya* is further classified into three levels: *Pravara* (superior)-adapted to all six tastes, *Madhyama* (moderate)-adapted to two to five tastes, and *Avara* (inferior)-adapted to only one taste.

Thus, the concept of *Satmya* illustrates Ayurveda's individualised approach to health, where suitability, habituation, and environment determine well-being, offering timeless insight into why a substance may nourish one person yet harm another.

5. The Importance of Digestion [25,26]

In Ayurveda, *Agni* is the metabolic fire responsible for the digestion, assimilation, and transformation of food. A robust *Agni* is synonymous with good health, while a weakened *Agni* leads to the formation of *Ama* (undigested toxic waste), which is the root cause of most diseases.

Types of *Agni*:

Tikshnagni: Intense, *Pitta*-dominant digestion that can handle all foods^[27].

Mandagni: Weak, *Kapha*-dominant digestion that struggles even with small amounts of food^[28].

Vishmagni: Irregular, *Vata*-dominant digestion that fluctuates unpredictably^[29].

Samagni: Balanced, ideal digestion where all three *doshas* are in harmony.^[30]

The digestive tract itself, known as *Koshta*, is also classified to determine an individual's digestive capacity and to guide dietary choices.

Further Acharya Vagabhatta classify *Koshta* into 3 types based on *Agni*:^[31]

Mrudu Koshta: *Pitta*-dominant

Madhyam Koshta: *Kapha*-dominant

Krura Koshta: *Vata*-dominant

Another reference of *Koshta* Vibhajan: ^[32]

Amashaya (Stomach): *Kapha*-dominant, for initial breakdown.

Pakvashaya (Small Intestine): *Pitta*-dominant, for digestion and absorption.

Malashaya (Large Intestine): *Vata*-dominant, for waste formation.

Grahani: A critical unit that regulates food flow and maintains *Agni*.^[33]

6. Ritu Prakriti and Traditional Food Preparations

1. *Ritucharya*, Ayurveda's seasonal regimen, teaches us to eat in harmony with nature, adjusting food choices as *Doshas* and digestive fire (*Agni*) shift through the year. Modern nutrition echoes this wisdom: instead of rigid rules, the focus is mindful eating-listening to body and environment.

1. In winter (*Hemanta* and *Shishir*): cold weakens vitality, so Ayurveda prescribes heavy, oily, warming meals. Modern equivalents include nutrient-dense comfort foods like root vegetables, ghee, avocado, and spiced stews. Spring (*Vasant*) comes with *Kapha* accumulation; light, pungent foods help balance it. Fresh greens, bitter vegetables, and light soups naturally cleanse and energise^[34,35,36].

2. Summer (*Grishma*): heat weakens digestion; cooling and hydrating foods such as fruits, salads and coconut water maintain balance, while heavy or spicy dishes are best avoided^[37].

3. Monsoon (*Varsha*) dampens *Agni*, calling for gut-friendly, lightly cooked meals, warming soups, and probiotics, while raw or cold foods can burden digestion^[38].
4. Autumn (*Sharad*): *Pitta* aggravates; cooling, soothing foods like sweet fruits, bitter vegetables, and light grains bring relief, while excess spice, salt, and sourness should be minimised^[39].

By adapting meals to the rhythm of the seasons, one nurtures resilience, supports digestion, and sustains a balanced state of well-being.

7. *Aahar Vidhi Visheshayatana*: Rules of Eating^[40]

Ayurveda prescribes *Aahar Vidhi Visheshayatana* (rules of eating) to support digestion and assimilation. The main meal should be taken at midday when *Agni* is strongest, filling the stomach half with food, one-fourth with liquid, and leaving one-fourth empty. Eating mindfully, without distractions, enhances satiety and nutrient absorption. Modern research echoes these principles, linking meal timing, portion balance, and attentiveness to better metabolic and digestive health.

Table1: *Aahara Vidhi Visheshayatana*

Sr no.	Factor of <i>Aahara Vidhi Visheshayatana</i>	Explanation	Example
1	<i>Prakrti</i>	It reveals the type of medications and diets used.	<i>Masha</i> is heavy and <i>Mudga</i> is light.
2	<i>Karana</i>	Food processing. When substances undergo processing, their properties change.	Alteration of the food quality is affected by dilution, heating, washing etc.
3	<i>Samyoga</i>	A combination of two or more food ingredients.	The mixture of honey & ghee taken together.
4	<i>Rashi</i>	Amount of substances to be taken.	<i>Sarvagraha</i> is the amount of each substance involved in diet, and the amount of every substance individually is called <i>Parigraha</i> .
5	<i>Desha</i>	<i>Desha</i> indicates the area where food substances are found.	It determines the variations of the qualities of the substances according to their territory due to different soil, etc.
6	<i>Kala</i>	<i>Kala</i> denotes time as years, age, and seasons.	The time factor is described in a dual context; one pertains to daily and seasonal variations, while the other deals with an individual's conditions of age and disease.
7	<i>Upayoga Samstha</i>	The dietary guidelines provided by our seer are known as <i>Upayoga Samstha</i> means.	Like food taken should be <i>Ushna</i> , <i>Snigdha</i> , etc
8	<i>Upayokta</i>	Habit and state of an individual	Food-taking person.

8. The Unseen Connection: Mind, Diet, and *Manas prakriti*

The Bhagavad Gita teaches that all life depends on *Aahara* (food), which comes from rain, sacrifice, and action. Ayurveda's holistic approach extends the concept of nutrition to encompass mental and emotional well-being. This profound connection is rooted in the classification of the mind's qualities (*Manas Prakriti*) and the influence of food on them and categorises *Aahara* into three types based on their impact on the mind and body^[41].

1. *Sattvic Aahara* (Purity): These are fresh, pure foods that promote clarity, health, and peace. They're recommended for longevity and a calm mind. Examples: fruits, vegetables, and milk^[42].
2. *Rajasic Aahara* (Passion): These foods are overstimulating, causing agitation, anger, and restlessness. They are often hot, spicy, or sour. Examples: coffee and excessive spices^[43].
3. *Tamasic Aahara* (Dullness): These are stale, processed, or heavy foods that lead to lethargy, *Apathya*, and dullness. This category is considered the unhealthiest. Examples: frozen food, meat, and alcohol^[44].

9. *Aahar Janya Rogas* (Diet-Related Diseases) and Prevention

Ayurveda emphasizes that improper dietary habits are the root cause of many diseases, including *Ajirna* (indigestion) and metabolic disorders. This understanding parallels modern medicine, which recognizes poor diet as a key factor behind obesity, type 2 diabetes, and cardiovascular diseases .

In Ayurvedic philosophy, *Aahar* (diet) is revered as *Prana* (the very essence of life) and honoured as *Mahabhaishajya* (the supreme medicine). Beyond nourishing the body, it is considered essential for maintaining *Bala* (strength), *Varna* (complexion), and *Upachaya* (growth and development).

Classical authorities have highlighted its importance. *Lolimaraj* states: "When diet is wrong, medicine is of no use; when diet is correct, medicine is not needed"^[45] Similarly, the *Sushruta Samhita* asserts that the essence of treatment lies in "*Sankshepta Kriya Yoga Nidan Parivarjanam*"^[46]-eliminating the root cause of disease through proper lifestyle and dietary regulation.

10. *Viruddha Aahar*: Food Incompatibilities^[47]

Ayurveda emphasises the concept of *Viruddha Ahara*-incompatible foods or combinations that disturb metabolism, generate *Ama* (toxins), and cause *Dosha* imbalance. Such incompatibility obstructs *Rasadi Dhatus* and leads to diseases like *Sandhya*, *Andhya*, *Visarpa*, *Udara roga*, *Visphota*, *Unmada etc*^[48]... eczema, allergic dermatitis, and skin disorders. *Acharya Charaka* described 18 types of *Viruddhahara*, including:

Table 2: *Viruddha Aahar*

S.no.	Name of <i>Viruddha</i>	Example
1	<i>Desha Viruddha</i> (place)	consuming dry, sharp foods in deserts or heavy, unctuous foods in marshy lands.
2	<i>Kala Viruddha</i> (season)	cold foods in winter, hot foods in summer
3	<i>Agni Viruddha</i> (digestion)	heavy foods in weak digestion.
4	<i>Matra Viruddha</i> (quantity)	Ghee and honey in equal quantities
5	<i>Satmya Viruddha</i> (habit)	cold, sweet foods in those accustomed to a hot, pungent diet.
6	<i>Dosha Viruddha</i> (constitution)	diet aggravating an already dominant dosha

7	<i>Samskara Viruddha</i> (preparation)	roasting flesh on castor wood.
8	<i>Virya Viruddha</i> (potency)	mixing hot and cold- potency foods
9	<i>Kostha Viruddha</i> (bowels)	mismatched laxatives in strong/weak bowels
10	<i>Avastha Viruddha</i> (condition)	heavy foods after exertion or sleep
11	<i>Krama Viruddha</i> (sequence)	eating without an urge for hunger or excretion
12	<i>Parihara Viruddha</i> (avoidance)	hot food after pork, cold after ghee.
13	<i>Upachara Viruddha</i> (treatment)	cold water after <i>Snehapana</i>
14	<i>Paka Viruddha</i> (cooking)	improperly cooked or burnt grains.
15	<i>Samyoga Viruddha</i> (combination)	milk with sour substances.
16	<i>Hridaya Viruddha</i> (unpleasant)	food not pleasing to the mind.
17	<i>Vidhi Viruddha</i> (rules)	eating in public or without privacy
18	<i>Sampat Viruddha</i> (quality)	unripe, overripe, or putrefied substances

Modern Correlation: Ayurveda's observations resonate with modern science, which notes that incompatible combinations-like milk with fish or heated honey-can impair digestion, while mixing high-sugar with fats or drug-food interactions (e.g., grapefruit with medicines) also affect metabolism and gut health.

11. *Dvadasha Ashana Pravicharana* (12 factors to be considered in food):

Acharya Sushruta emphasised twelve types of food choices based on individual condition, *dosha*, season, and digestive capacity: ^[49]

1. *Shita Aahara* (food with cold potency): Beneficial in thirst, burning sensation, poisoning, emaciation, fainting, and haemorrhages, *Shita Aahara* is preferred.
2. *Ushna Aahara* (food with hot potency): Useful in *Vata* and *Kapha* disorders, after *Snehana* and in unmoistened body states.
3. *Snigdha Aahara* (food rich in fats): Indicated in *Vata Prakriti*, *Ruksha* conditions, *Vata* disorders, and sexual debility.
4. *Ruksha Aahara* (rough food): For obesity, diabetes, excess *Kapha*, and after oleation therapy.
5. *Drava Aahara* (liquid diet): given in emaciation, thirst, weakness, and low vitality.
6. *Shushka Aahara* (dry food): Indicated in excess *Kleda*, wounds, diabetes, and water retention.
7. *Ek-Kalika Aahara* (once a day): Recommended for those with impaired digestion (*Mandagni*).
8. *Dvi-Kalika Aahara* (twice a day): For individuals with normal digestion.
9. *Aushadha-yukta Aahara* (medicated food): For patients with aversion to medicines, food is mixed with drugs.
10. *Matraheen Aahara* (restricted quantity): For weak digestive power and diseased individuals.
11. *Prashamaka Aahara* (*Dosha*-pacifying diet): Food planned according to season and habitat to balance *Doshas*.
12. *Vratiprayojaka Aahara* (nourishing diet): Balanced food containing all six *Rasas* to maintain health and promote psychosomatic wellbeing.

Conclusion

Ayurveda and modern nutrition, though arising from different epistemologies, converge on core principles: diet is central to health, individualised, and deeply linked with digestion, environment, and lifestyle. While

modern nutrition dissects nutrients and mechanisms, Ayurveda provides a holistic, preventive, and personalised framework. Integrating both perspectives offers a sustainable and comprehensive approach to dietary science-bridging ancient wisdom with contemporary evidence for health promotion and disease prevention.

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