

The Art of Eating Right: Ahara Vidhi Vidhana in Ayurvedic Perspective

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Abstract

Introduction : Maintaining health is influenced not only by the quantity and quality of food but also by the manner in which it is consumed. The processes of digestion, absorption, and assimilation involve intricate procedures influenced by physical, physiological, social, and emotional factors. To fully reap the benefits of food, adherence to specific guidelines is essential. Ayurveda provides insights into what, when, where, and how food should be consumed to optimize its effects on overall well-being.

Aims and Objectives: To assess and compile information on diverse dietary and dining guidelines (Ahara Vidhi Vidhana) documented in Ayurvedic texts, examining their structure and effectiveness within the context of Charaka Samhita.

Materials and Methods: The data for the review primarily collected from Ayurvedic Samhitas, including Charaka Samhita, Susrutha Samhita, Ashtanga Sangraha, Ashtanga Hridaya, and Sharangadhara Samhita.

Observations: The guidelines are categorized into dietary rules and dining rules. The former outlines the types of food that should be consumed based on their quality and the individual's condition. The latter focuses on the manner in which food should be consumed, directly influencing both the hygiene of the food and the state of the mind.

Conclusion: Both Ahara (diet) and Ahara Vidhi Vidhana (dietetic rules) are extremely significant in our day to day life . The appropriate application of both contributes to maintaining a healthy condition, while their improper utilization can lead to various diseases.

Keywords: Ahara VidhiVidhana; Modern Dietary Principles; Dining rules; Charaka Samhita; Health

1. Introduction

Ahara is considered as the most important factor for the maintenance of life.it is described as one among the three pillars of life.^[1] Ahara is also considered as the Mahabaishajya as it promotes health in both diseased and normal people.^[2] While considering food and diet, dietary habits also seek equal importance. The risk of lifestyle diseases including cancer, heart disease, diabetes, and a number of other medical conditions is significantly increased by poor eating habits and food selections. The overconsumption of some foods, dietary inadequacies, and an excessive intake of saturated fats and refined or processed foods are all examples of poor eating habits. Acharya Charaka mentioned ahara vidhi vidhana which can be considered as the rules to be followed while eating food for proper digestion and maintenance of health.^[3]

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Ayurveda has categorized food based on factors such as seasons, age, purpose, benefits, constitution, daily use, and non-use. The comprehensive utilization of food occurs through adherence to these guidelines for food consumption, referred to as Aharavidhividhana. Among the various teachings by Acharyas on these rules, Charaka's stands out as particularly practical. He explicitly outlines what should be followed, what should be avoided, and who should adhere to these dietary guidelines.

1.1. Aims and Objectives

To assess and compile information on diverse dietary and dining guidelines (Ahara Vidhi Vidhana) documented in Ayurvedic texts, examining their structure and effectiveness within the context of Charaka Samhita.

2. Materials and Methods

The data for the review primarily collected from Ayurvedic Samhitas, including Charaka Samhita, Susruta Samhita, Ashtanga Sangraha, Ashtanga Hridaya, and Sharangadhara Samhita and articles from google scholar, pubmed search engines by using the key word, ahara, ahara vidhi Vidhana, dietary habits.

2.1. Ahara vidhi Vidhana

2.1.1. Ushnam ashniyat

It is advisable to consume food that is warm, as doing so preserves the flavor, enhances digestive processes, and facilitates easy digestion. The warmth of the food contributes to the normalization of proper movement (Anulomana) of Vata, as its Ushnaguna acts as an antagonist to the factors causing Vata aggravation. Additionally, warm food aids in reducing excess Kapha in the body.^[4] The term "ushna" refers to the temperature of the food, rather than the potency of the food material. It is advisable for the consumed food to be moderately warm, avoiding excessive heat. Therefore, the concept of "samyak ushna" is emphasized, indicating the ideal or optimum temperature for food consumption. Sharangadhara illustrated this principle by using hot water (Ushna Jala) as an example of Lekhana (Scraping) karma, highlighting its effectiveness in this context.^[5] A warm meal stimulates and dissolves the bodhaka kapha located at the rasanendriya (sense organ of taste). The dissolution of bodhaka kapha moisten the rasendriya, facilitating the assessment of taste. The warm (Ushna) property stimulates pachaka pitta (digestive fire or agni), leading to the swift digestion of food.^[6] While the consumption of warm food (Ushna Ahara) is generally recommended, individuals with some Pitta predominant diseases, such as Raktapitta, should not consume warm food. This precautionary measure is taken to avoid potential complications like burning sensations, unconsciousness, and loose stools that may arise from the intake of excessive ushna ahara in these conditions.^[7]

2.1.2. Snigdham ashniyat

Including snigdha ahara in the diet has the ability to enhance both the palatability and the subdued digestive power. Similar to how ghee ignites fire, the inclusion of unctuous elements facilitates quick digestion, promoting the smooth movement (Anulomana) of Vata owing to the softness imparted by the Snigdha Guna. Moreover, this type of food contributes to the strengthening of the sense organs and promotes overall growth, strength, and a healthy complexion in the body^[8]. Snigdha dravya, characterized by its unctuous nature, promotes the sweet taste (madhura avasthapaka), enhances strength (bala), and rejuvenates the body by slowing down the aging process. However, it's crucial to maintain a balanced level of unctuousness, as both atisnigdhta and rukshatha can negatively impact agni and disrupt the digestive process. Excessive snigdhatva in food prolongs digestion, leading to a significant increase in kapha and medas, resulting in symptoms such as excessive salivation, loss of taste, a feeling of heaviness in the heart, and disorders of the abdomen and throat. Therefore, moderation in the level of unctuousness is essential for optimal digestion and overall well-being.^[9] Additionally, the consumption of dry food substances is discouraged due to their association with adverse effects such as the loss of strength and complexion (balavarna nasha), dryness of the skin (twak rukshata), and sakrt muthra nirodha.^[10] While the consumption of unctuous (Snigdha) food is generally recommended, individuals with pure Kaphamedaja diseases, obesity, Kaphajagulma (phantom tumor), Prameha (diabetes), Raktapitta, Kushta (skin disorders), Udara (ascites), and similar conditions should exercise caution. In such cases, the intake of unctuous food should be approached carefully, as it may act as a causative or aggravating factor for these conditions.^[11]

2.1.3. Maatravat ashniyath

Consuming food in an appropriate quantity maintains the balance of Tridosha, contributing to an extended lifespan. The right amount of food does not compromise the digestive capacity, ensuring smooth peristalsis and comfortable passage of well-digested food towards the rectum before elimination. As clarified by Chakrapani, when food is consumed in the

right quantity, it stays in its designated place, preventing disturbance to other Doshas.^[12] The consumption of food should align with the strength of one's digestive fire. It is advisable to eat either half or one-third of the stomach's capacity, leaving the remaining space for liquids and other bodily humors. This practice promotes optimal digestion and overall well-being.^[13] The suitable amount of food intake is discerned by specific indicators, including the absence of a feeling of pressure on the stomach, unhindered functioning of the heart (hridaya), absence of pain in the flanks, and avoidance of excessive heaviness in the abdomen. Optimal food intake ensures proper nourishment of the senses, alleviation of hunger and thirst, and a comfortable feeling during various activities.^[14] Insufficient food intake is identified by symptoms such as diminished strength, altered complexion, and inadequate nourishment. It leads to a sense of non-satiety, affliction of the body, mind, and sense organs, distorted intellect, and a disruption in the nourishment of bodily tissues (dhatu poshana).^[15]

2.1.4. *Jeerne ashniyath*

The subsequent meal should only be consumed after the thorough digestion of the previous one. Consuming the next meal before the proper digestion of the previous one can lead to the improper mixing of Ahararasa (primary product of digestion) from the earlier meal with that of the new food. This immediate mixing can result in the rapid aggravation of all Doshas. Therefore, allowing adequate time for the complete digestion of each meal is essential to maintain a balanced and harmonious state of the doshas.^[15] Indeed, the consumption of food is recommended after the digestion of the previous meal, particularly when the doshas are in their proper locations, the digestive fire (agni) is activated, an appetite has developed, the body feels light with a sense of thirst, the orifices of srotas (channels) are open, belching is pure, the heart (hridaya) functions normally, there is a regular urge to expel body wastes, and a sense of enthusiasm is present. Ensuring these conditions are met before eating contributes to effective digestion and overall well-being.^[16] A healthy individual is recommended to have meals only twice a day, specifically in the morning and evening. Consuming food between these times is discouraged to ensure adequate time for proper digestion. It is advised not to eat within 3 hours after the previous meal. During this period, the production of Rasadhatu (primary product of digested food) occurs, and consuming food during this time can impede the process, potentially leading to various diseases. Adhering to these guidelines supports optimal digestion and overall health.^[17]

2.1.5. *Veeryaavirudham asniyath*

It is advisable to consume food with a noncontradictory Virya (potency). By opting for noncontradictory food, an individual can avoid the risk of diseases such as Kushta (skin disorders), Andhya (blindness), Visarpa (Erysipelas disease), and other complications associated with Virudha (incompatible foods). Choosing foods that align with each other in terms of their potency contributes to maintaining overall health and preventing potential adverse effects.^[18] Viruddha Ahara, or incompatible food combinations, as mentioned in ancient Ayurvedic texts like Charaka and Sushruta Samhitas, can indeed have implications at a molecular level, potentially leading to inflammation and health issues. While many traditional food incompatibilities might not be prevalent in today's diet, it's important to consider contemporary dietary habits and identify potential new incompatibilities from an Ayurvedic perspective. The emerging field of topography, a science related to food combinations, highlights the importance of understanding the interactions between basic categories of food. According to this science, it is advised not to combine proteins with starches and carbohydrates; instead, they should be consumed separately. Combining proteins and starches can lead to delayed absorption of one or the other. Similarly, the consumption of sugars and acid fruits together can hinder the action of ptyalin and pepsin, reduce saliva secretion, and delay digestion.

This perspective underscores that unwanted side effects may occur within the body when two or more types of foods are consumed together. While these reactions might be less significant in the short term, they could potentially lead to serious side effects over the long term, emphasizing the importance of mindful food combinations for overall health.^[19]

2.1.6. *Ishta dese/ Ishta sarvopakaranam bunjita*

Dining at one's preferred locations, equipped with desired accessories, is recommended to avoid psychological trauma. Consuming food in comfortable environments with the right accessories can prevent mental distress. In contrast, eating in uncomfortable places without proper accessories may lead to psychic agitation, potentially resulting in complications caused by a troubled mind.^[20] Even when the food is consumed in the right quantity, a mind afflicted by factors such as fear, anger, shyness, or jealousy can lead to the misinterpretation of hygienic food as unhygienic, resulting in Ajirna (indigestion).^[21]

Susruta provided specific guidelines regarding the location and methods for food consumption. He advised choosing a beautiful and auspicious place, free from Vaastu Dosha (unpropitious land) and unwanted individuals. The

recommended dining environment should have a pleasant fragrance and be well-covered to protect against dust and other organisms. Susruta also detailed an extensive list of utensils suitable for the preparation, serving, storage, and dining of specific kinds of food, such as using copper vessels for milk and earthen pots for alcohol. These guidelines reflect a comprehensive approach to creating a conducive and hygienic setting for the enjoyment of meals.^[22]

Vagbhata emphasized that eating should not be done in an exposed area without any shelter, beneath a tree, on a bed, in hot sunlight, or in a dark place. Additionally, consuming food in a broken or soiled utensil is discouraged.^[23] These guidelines are rooted in the understanding that the surroundings and the condition of the utensils can impact both the psyche and the hygiene of the dining experience. Eating in inappropriate places or using inadequate equipment can divert the mind from the food and increase the risk of contamination, highlighting the importance of choosing proper locations and utensils for a hygienic and focused dining environment.^[23]

2.1.7. *Na atidrutham bunjitha*

One should not consume food in hurry. Eating in a rush can lead to the food entering the wrong passage, impeding its proper movement and potentially causing asphyxiation. Moreover, hurried eating may result in the improper placement of food within the digestive system. In addition to these concerns, a person eating hastily is likely to miss the opportunity to appreciate the quality of the food or identify any defects, such as the presence of hair or other foreign materials mixed with the food. Taking the time to eat slowly and mindfully is encouraged for both the enjoyment of the meal and proper digestion.^[24]

Eating in haste can lead to the aggravation of Vata, causing the food to be misdirected to other areas of the digestive system. This can result in symptoms such as hiccups and Avasada. Optimal digestion requires the proper placement of food at the right time and for an appropriate duration. When food is consumed hurriedly, it bypasses various digestive regions quickly, preventing the expected functions in those areas from occurring in a proper manner. This, in turn, leads to disturbances in digestion and absorption. Physiologically, eating in haste can impede the natural processes of salivation and the secretion of enzymes. Additionally, hurried eating often results in insufficient chewing of food, leaving it in larger particles. These larger particles do not undergo the full action of digestive juices because of their size, impacting the effective breakdown of nutrients during digestion. Taking the time to chew food thoroughly and allowing for proper salivation and enzyme secretion supports optimal digestion and nutrient absorption.^[25] Therefore, taking the time to eat at a moderate pace and allowing for the natural digestive processes is crucial for overall well-being.

2.1.8. *Na Ativilambitham bunjitha*

Consuming food very slowly is also not advisable. Eating at an extremely slow pace may lead to dissatisfaction or lack of satiation, potentially causing individuals to eat more than necessary. Moreover, when food is consumed very slowly, it tends to cool down, and the irregular pace of digestion can result in inefficient contact with the digestive fire. This irregular digestion may impact the body's ability to absorb nutrients effectively.^[26] People who consume food while watching television or under tension, worries, or various distracting thoughts may not be aware of their eating speed. In such situations, individuals tend to eat more, and there is reduced awareness of the good or bad qualities of the food, similar to the effects of consuming food in a hurried manner. The psychological factors associated with hurried eating can also be applied in these scenarios.

Physiologically, the delayed intake of each bolus during distracted eating can lead to multiple Avasthapaka (stages of digestion) of food, resulting in the formation of Ama. Therefore, practicing mindful and focused eating is not only essential for psychological well-being but also crucial for supporting proper digestion and preventing the formation of Ama.^[27]

2.1.9. *Ajalpan ahasan tanmana bunjitha*

Consuming food while talking, laughing, or without proper concentration is not recommended. Eating in such distracted states can lead to complications similar to those arising from hurried eating, including the abnormal movement of food through an improper passage. Maintaining focus and mindfulness during meals is crucial to support the natural digestive processes and prevent potential issues associated with the misdirection of food within the digestive system. Eating with attention contributes to a more harmonious and effective digestion.^[28] Mindful eating is an approach to food that involves paying deliberate attention to the act of eating, moment by moment, without passing judgment. This practice encourages individuals to cultivate a heightened awareness of the food they are consuming and their overall experience during the process. By being fully present and engaged with the sensory aspects of eating, such as taste, texture, and aroma, mindful eating aims to foster a more conscious and enjoyable relationship with food. This approach

can also enhance awareness of hunger and fullness, promoting a healthier and more balanced relationship with eating.^[28]

2.1.10. *Aatmanam abisamikshya Samyak bunjitha*

"Atmanam" refers to the self, and "Abhisameekshya" means properly assessed. Each individual possesses unique qualities. While general rules for dietary habits are beneficial, they should be applied after careful consideration of one's own self, taking into account individual constitution and capacity.^[29] Analyzing whether a particular food is conducive or harmful, understanding one's appetite, and maintaining a balanced diet are crucial for maintaining good health.

An adaptive eating approach known as intuitive eating, based on internal body signals and interoceptive awareness, aligns with this concept. Intuitive eating involves listening to the body's physical cues for hunger and satiety, rather than being driven by emotional or environmental factors. This style of eating has demonstrated its significance in promoting healthy dietary practices and improving both physical and emotional well-being.^[30]

3. Discussion

Ahara Vidhi Vidhana encompasses the methods and rules of food intake, comprising the do's and don'ts related to dietary and dining practices. Deviations from these dietary rules, such as irregular eating habits, consuming food before proper digestion, excessive eating, intake of dry, hard, and cold food items, as well as consuming heavy-to-digest foods, mental distractions, and various psychological factors, can adversely impact the digestive process. This can lead to the formation of ama, which is a metabolic error, ultimately causing disorders of immunological, digestive, and metabolic origin. Following proper dietary guidelines and mindful eating practices is essential for maintaining optimal health and preventing potential health issues.^[31]

The dietary habits of the contemporary era have undergone significant transformations, influenced by Western diets, a surge in processed food production, rapid urbanization, and shifts in lifestyle. Owing to hectic schedules, the prevalent practice of consuming cold or reheated food for convenience often diverges from the traditional guideline of "ushnam asniyat," which recommends the consumption of warm or freshly prepared meals. Reheating foods that were prepared long ago or stored in refrigerators has the potential to diminish the nutritional content of the food and, in certain instances, may lead to food poisoning and foodborne diseases.

Indulging in an excessive intake of oily and dry foods contradicts the dietary principles of "snigdham asniyat." Many commonly consumed items, such as bakery snacks, deep-fried foods, products made with refined flour like biscuits and bread, spicy foods, and alcohol, fall into this category. Diets rich in fats pose an elevated risk of cardiovascular diseases.

Virya viruddha is the use of combination of shita and ushna virya substances like fish and milk, meat and curd, sour fruits and milk. Such food combinations are harmful imparting its untoward effects on immune system, cellular metabolism and growth hormones. Viruddha ahara induces inflammatory effect at a molecular level causing agni mandya, ama and metabolic disorders. Consumption of highly deep fried foods and preparations with milk and egg, milk and sour juices and cooking with reheated oils are common nowadays. Such wrong food combinations deteriorate the body tissues by creating immunological imbalance.

Maintaining both hygiene and a positive psychological state is essential during meals. Ensuring cleanliness in the eating environment is crucial to prevent microbial contamination of food and related illnesses. Certain materials should be avoided for specific foods, for instance, acidic foods should not be stored in copper utensils due to a chemical reaction that can produce harmful substances, similar to the risks associated with using low-grade plastic covers for wrapping hot foods. Contemporary dietary habits, such as eating at restaurants, consuming take-away meals, eating on the go, and eating while working, deviate from the traditional principles of "ishta deshe asniyat" (eating in a preferred place) and "ishta sarvopakaranam asniyat" (using preferred utensils).

In today's hectic schedules, individuals often consume their meals quickly, sometimes even while standing. Conversely, eating very slowly while watching TV or using a mobile phone can lead to overeating. The fast-paced lifestyle also contributes to hurried eating without proper chewing, resulting in issues such as heartburn and indigestion. Additionally, a segment of the younger generation tends to eat while engaged with their phones or watching TV, often without being mindful of their satiety levels. These practices run counter to the dietary principles of "nati drutam" (not too fast) and "nati vilambhitam" (not too slow).

Mental distractions have been observed to contribute to overeating, leading to obesity. Conversely, being attentive to a meal is associated with consuming an adequate portion and a reduced likelihood of weight gain. The presence of family or friends engaging in conversation and laughter, as well as watching TV, significantly increases food intake. This is because these activities divert attention away from the consumed food, potentially leading to increased consumption. The evolving dietary patterns, influenced by exposure to various cuisines, are reflective of the globalized world we live in. Our society is more open to the global market compared to earlier times, embracing diverse cultures, particularly in terms of food. Additionally, the widespread adoption of various fasting diets represents a trend in dietary practices that contradicts the principles of "atmanam abhisameekshyam asniyat" (proper self-assessment).

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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