

Digestion: Agni and Pitta

by Ingrid Naiman

Ayurveda teaches a system of three “derangements” or doshas. The Sanskrit term actually means faults so you could say, as a general rule, people have three different ways of going amuck.

The doshas are derivative of the effect of the elements on what is called prakriti, what we might call constitutional type.

In our Western culture in which nearly everyone has had some surgery, such as tonsillectomies and appendectomies, the vata dosha is deranged. Vata is composed of air and ether and is what is called “wind” in Tibetan medicine. In moderation, wind stimulates fire, but in excess it puts it out.

Exposure to radiation; certain types of electrical equipment, including most computers, air conditioning and fans; shock; wind; and seasonal changes can cause the air element to become more excited and volatile. When this happens, it blows out fire. One of the symptoms of this is an appetite which seems to be insatiable but when food is put on the plate, the “patient” tends to eat a few bites and then move the food around without really making a very big dent in the serving.

Fire

Constitutional fire is responsible for digestion. It is availability of fire that determines the production of gastric juices: hydrochloric acid, bile, enzymes, in short the caustic chemicals that are required for the breakdown of food and its conversion into micronutrients that can be assimilated by the body and bulk matter that needs to be eliminated. Whenever this fire, called agni in Sanskrit, is weak, there is not enough digestive power to metabolize food.

What this means is that an individual could be on what might be touted as the world’s most perfect diet and still not be able to digest the food. Dr. Vasant Lad taught, “Sooner or later, all food is cooked.” He then drew exquisitely on the blackboard and showed a cauldron in the abdomen.

Traditionally, Indian food has always been prepared with a lot of heat. By Chinese standards, not to mention the advocates of raw foods diets, Indian food is overcooked, but it is very easy to digest because the food is predigested by heat and spices. In my former days when I had a clinic, I often met patients who had had chemotherapy and could hardly hold down food much less eat without severe gastric distress. One particularly memorable evening, I videotaped Dr. Smita Naram cooking dinner for her husband and me. I asked her if

she would prepare something that was easy for patients on chemotherapy to digest because I wanted to show them the video. She made a lovely meal in less than twenty minutes and gave me the leftovers to take back to the clinic.

I want to interject that Ayurveda frowns on reheating food, not because proper means of storage were lacking in ancient India but because the vitality of food is lessened. People with mucus congestion, the kapha type, are particularly admonished not to reheat food. Nevertheless, the lucky patients who had a chance to taste Smita's cuisine were astonished to find that they were able to eat as much as they wanted without gastric distress, belching, bloating, and pain.

Fruit

The theory here is that when one's digestive power is limited, one must get the needed nutrition from foods that are easy to digest. The easiest foods to eat are fruits because the acids that make fruit sour demand less hydrochloric acid availability. The more tart the fruits, the easier they are to digest. Over the years that I have been teaching this theory, people grimace and make faces and protest that they do not understand. I have asked, "What don't you understand?" Questions are immediately asked about peaches and pears and bananas. While fresh peaches and pears are usually digestible, they are not nearly as sour as most berries, again not strawberries so much as raspberries, blueberries, and gooseberries. I vividly recall one patient looking at me with misty eyes saying, "I know I'm dying, but what can I eat when it gets really bad?" I told her that grapes and berries would remain easy to digest and the relief on her face was something I will remember the rest of my life.

Spices

Besides fresh fruit, spices make food more digestible. First, when food is cooked in spices, as with a curry, the spices are absorbed by the food in such a way as to almost predigest the food. Second, spices stimulate the secretion of saliva and digestive juices. If people really do not have the capacity to produce these conversion chemicals, the spices will not excite what cannot respond to the stimulus, but the food itself is nevertheless easier to digest. It is important to use spices that have not been irradiated and important to cook the food in the spices without burning the spices!

From this you can see that Ayurveda is a world apart from the raw foods advocates as well as those who think that a good meal is a low calorie bowl of lettuce with some irradiated black pepper sprinkled on top.

More importantly, when food is not digested, it is broken down by fermentation rather than digestion. This produces gases which are both noisy and uncomfortable. Worse, the gases are absorbed by other tissues of the body which become both toxic and spastic. So, excess vata is muscularly and neurologically harmful.

Finally

In the days ahead, I will bring back some of my own spice mixtures. One woman wrote me that her husband would divorce her if she stopped using the Sky Mountain spices. I have a seed blend and a curry powder that are specially formulated to make meals more savory and digestible. This said, nothing can help anyone who

eats food that is indigestible. Top on my list of such foods is everything that is prepared in a microwave. Such food is responsible for a great deal of gastric distress.

For those who do have discomfort after eating, try chewing on some fennel seeds and then spitting out the pulpy part after swallowing the juice. Anything aromatic like this will relieve gas. My carminative teas are also helpful and I'll post some of them as soon as I get a chance.

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