



# Ayurveda through a contemporary lens

All about Ayurveda: a modern take on yoga's sister science.

By Joanna Webber

Every time you go on social media, you are met with the latest health advice. When this contradicts something you read yesterday, it gets confusing. Is breakfast the most important meal of the day? Do we all need two litres of water a day, or achieve 10,000 steps to stay fit? These are common health myths which are mostly not supported by research. This is why many people like to look to longer-established wisdom, which has weathered the storm of time.

Ayurveda is one such living wisdom tradition, being the oldest known complete system of medicine. Originating in India over 5,000 years ago, it has tried and tested methods to establish what can keep you healthy. However, there is very little 'one size fits all' advice because Ayurveda recognises we're all different. The word 'Ayurveda' means the 'science of life' and describes a healthy person as 'someone whose body, mind, senses and spirit are integrated as a unified whole'. If we achieve this, we are naturally full of energy, sleep well, enjoy balanced moods, contentment, healthy digestion and a sense of wonder and appreciation for life. It is seen as the sister science of yoga, and they work well when practiced together, being relevant to all people and all times.

## The 5 great elements: space, air, fire, water and earth

According to Ayurveda, there are five elements that make up everything in the universe, including our minds and bodies. At every level of life, from the seasons, your age and the time of day, these five elements are present. In a way, they express the language of nature. For example, air is like the wind and is constantly on the move, a bit cold, drying and light; on the other hand, fire is hot, steamy and fierce, whereas water is wet, a little cooling and heavy. In this way, these elements are present in every tissue, every cell and every organ in our body, governing all bodily functions as well as thoughts and feelings.

## The 3 doshas

Ayurvedic sages condensed the five great elements into three constitutional types or doshas, made up of these five elements as follows:

- ☞ **Vata:** is composed of air and space and is needed for us to move, for our senses to function and for respiration.
- ☞ **Pitta:** is composed of the fire element with some water and drives all our biochemical functions such as digestion and the transformation of waste.
- ☞ **Kapha:** is composed of water and earth and is the basis of all physical matter, such as our muscles, bones and blood.

We all contain all three doshas, but it's our particular combination of them that makes us who we are. Most people have one or two doshas which are more dominant and this determines what you look like, your mental characteristics and your personality. Babies aren't born with a user's manual, but knowing which Ayurvedic dosha, or mind-body type you are, and how to keep this in balance, is a good place to start.

So, if pitta is clearly your main dosha, you have a pitta-dominant constitution. But if vata and pitta are both equally important, you can say you are a vata-pitta constitution. It's very rare to have all three doshas in equal measure — but if you do, consider yourself a blessed tridoshic type.

☞ **Vata dominance:** tend to have light, slender body-frame and are prone to dry skin. They are sometimes hungry but sometimes not at mealtimes, with erratic, changeable natures. They are quick to talk, chatty and move a lot. They are super creative and full of ideas, but may rush work and make mistakes. They may get lost in thoughts and daydream. They tend to be light sleepers and wake easily, especially if something is on their mind. They also feel the cold. They're least resilient in the face of change and disrupted routine. Out of balance they can experience bloating, constipation, dryness,

insomnia and anxiety.

☞ **Pitta dominance:** tend to have a more regular body frame, with a piercing gaze, and are prone to red, sensitive skin. They can set their watches on their rumbling stomachs, need to eat regularly or else they can get 'hangry'. They are confident, enjoy work challenges and are happy being the centre of attention. They are competitive and like to take charge and lead a group. They are also organised, like to get things perfect and can be a little hard on themselves if they make a mistake. They can get quite hot and bothered in the summer and may have pink cheeks and freckles. Out of balance they may be prone to inflammatory conditions, acid reflux, skin issues and other symptoms with a burning sensation.

☞ **Kapha dominance:** tend to have well-built, solid body-frames. They're often not hungry till mid-morning and can happily manage on two meals each day if they tune into genuine hunger. They're calm, peaceful and make loyal friends, always ready with a hug. They are good team players and 'quiet achievers'; they may take a bit longer to learn but their long-term retention is excellent. They are good sleepers but can take a while to get going each morning. They also don't tend to like cold, damp weather which can make them feel a bit sluggish. Out of balance they are prone to sluggish digestion, excess mucus, weight gain, water retention and high cholesterol.

Once you start to understand the doshas, you'll spot their characteristics in friends, family and colleagues. Imagine a delayed plane journey scenario: airy vatas will be anxiously pacing up and down looking at the announcement board every two minutes; fiery pittas will have ascertained from the info desk how much extra time they have and will use this to complete tasks; earthy kaphas will be relaxing with a book and tasty snack.

## Using knowledge of doshas to stay balanced

Whilst our doshic constitutions are present from birth, doshas are not fixed but can change according to the food we eat, how happy we are feeling, how late we go to bed and even if the weather is hot or cold. It is often your main dosha that can get unbalanced first which can then cause health problems.

When it comes to keeping balanced, Ayurveda teaches us that 'like increases like' and 'opposites balance opposites'. This principle is central to understanding how you can manage your constitution and allow you to flourish. So, a fiery, hot pitta constitution eating hot food in the desert becomes too hot and may suffer with pitta-related health issues such as skin rashes or acid digestion. To balance this



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out, they need cooling, calming herbs, foods and lifestyle practices. Key words for balancing vata dosha are calming, warming, strengthening, consistency and grounding: ensure plenty of regularity and routine, especially when it comes to an early bedtime, with a warm, nourishing diet of mainly cooked food, with soothing herbs such as ginger and fennel and plenty of good quality oils. As their bodies can be drier and stiffer, they are supported by a yoga practice that is calming, quietening and warming, generally restorative or yin are ideal.

Key words for balancing pitta dosha are cooling, relaxing, surrendering, forgiving and gentle: get the right work-life balance with enough play, adequate hydration and a diet that is not too spicy, sour or salty, plenty of green leafy vegetables with cooling herbs such as rose, mint and coriander. Minimise use of saunas, especially in summer. A stronger practice is fine but needs to end with cooling postures and breathwork.

Key words for balancing kapha dosha are stimulating, moving, warming, lightening and expressing: keep warm and energised, with plenty of daily exercise and stimulation, as well as eating mainly cooked, warm foods with energising herbs such as cinnamon and ginger. Their yoga practice can be stimulating and warming, with strength poses as they tend to have strong joints and muscles.

## Ayurveda's wisdom recognises that we are all interconnected

Our wellbeing and the health of our planetary ecosystem are intimately linked. The more in tune we are with nature, the more we can promote self-healing, whatever dosha we are.

Ayurveda is about living in connection with daily and seasonal rhythms — something the rest of nature and all other species manage to do without even thinking about it.

Indeed, for most of human history we lived completely in balance with our surroundings. Modern agriculture, industry, technology and digitalised lives have decreased connectedness with nature. One of the most valuable things we can all do is to take time to regularly notice the natural world. Listening to birdsong, looking at the stars, smell freshly picked herbs — things humans have been doing since the dawn of time which foster a sense of wonder and awe. Research reinforces that noticing nature in small, everyday ways can lead to radical health results.

Ayurveda is essentially the art of living in harmony with nature. Ayurveda's methods work in harmony with your body and with nature and do not prescribe to the 'quick fix' culture prevalent today. Its overall aim is to empower you to live a long, healthy, happy life and achieve your goals.

Ayurveda and yoga both exist to help us re-connect with ourselves. They can be seen as two sides of the same coin. Ayurveda is the healing side of yoga, and yoga is the spiritual side of Ayurveda. Together they encompass a complete approach to the wellbeing of the body, the mind, and the spirit.

## Where to learn more?

To explore your Ayurveda constitution, you can try out a dosha quiz here: [theyayurvedaacademy.com/dosha-quiz](http://theyayurvedaacademy.com/dosha-quiz) ॐ

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