

# Apprehending and Applauding the Therapeutic Importance of Fasting in Ayurveda

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p><i>Article type:</i> Review article</p> <hr/> <p><i>Article History:</i> Received: 27 Sep 2015 Accepted: 03 Dec 2015 Published: 09 Feb 2016</p> <hr/> <p><i>Keywords:</i> Ayurveda Depletion Diseases Fasting Therapeutic</p>	<p>Ayurveda, the Indian art of holistic medicine describes fasting in terms of Upavasa and considers it as one among the depletion therapies. Besides the extensive explanations on the preventive purports of fasting, the classics have explicitly explained and exemplified the therapeutic importance of fasting while treating different diseases and dealing with different stages of the diseases. Fever, eye disorders, diarrhoea, nasal disorders, vomiting, gastroenteritis are a few diseases elucidated, where fasting plays a pivotal part. Ayurveda acknowledges the aspect that fasting brings about the digestion of the metabolic toxins, kindles the digestive fire, removes the blockage in the channels and there by aids in minimizing the disease. And also, the stage/intensity of the diseases [mild/moderate/maximum] is of great importance to modulate the manner of fasting; either solely or stringed along with the required therapeutic procedures. The duration of fast depends upon the dosha involved; it is longer in Kaphaja disorders and shorter in those due to Vata dosha. The classics have elaborately and exceptionally explained the signs and symptoms of adequate, excess and inadequate fasting along with the contraindications during the execution of fasting, with a view to aid the physician administer apt and accurate treatment and thereby help the individual attain perfect health. The concept and canons of fasting are so very much incorporated and interlaced in the vast science of Ayurveda that it advocates, acknowledges and admires depletion therapy, which includes Upavasa / fasting, as the best treatment modality a physician should adopt, by stating, "langhanam paramoushadam".</p>

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## Introduction

Ayurveda, the science of life and the kernel of ancient Indian wisdom, is the ultimate art of holistic medicine. It manoeuvres mankind not only to combat diseases but also to maintain and manage absolute health.

The classics explicate that health is nothing but the equilibrium state of Vata, Pitta and Kapha, the three somatic doshas (humours or constituents) and Satva, Rajas and Tamas, the mental doshas. And also, the body and the mind constitute the substrata of diseases. Thus, the vitiation of Vata, Pitta and Kapha along with Rajas and Tamas result in various diseases (1).

Ayurvedic classics, with a view to void of the agony and the ailments, have justly described two fold therapeutic modalities: langhana or depletion therapy and brihmana or nourishing therapy. The depletion therapy is defined as that which brings about reduction or depletion of the bodily virtues, causing lightness of the body.

Fasting is one among the depletion therapies described along with the elimination therapies, physical exercise, exposure to sun and such others (2). Thus, the pivotal role of fasting as one of the therapeutic modalities during the treatment various diseases and during different stages of the diseases, as described in the distinguished classics of Ayurveda, demands comprehensive apprehension and competitive application. This article is an earnest attempt to expound and establish the effect and efficiency of fasting, as described in the classics of Ayurveda, with regard to the same.

### Definition of fasting

Ayurvedic classics delineate fasting as Upavasa. It is defined as abstinence from all the four forms of food—chewing, licking, swallowing and drinking (3). The act, however, should be executed in a systematic form, under medical supervision.

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### Principle of fasting

The ash particles on fire reduce its intensity and thereby adversely affect the process of cooking. Similarly, the vitiated dohas in the body, particularly the Aamashaya (the digestive viscera) reduce the intensity or impair the digestive fire and cause digestive impairment, producing ama (metabolic toxins), which is the root cause of all diseases. They together block the minute channels of the body, resulting in various diseases. Fasting, in the absence of food in the viscera, however, brings about digestion of the metabolic toxins, kindles the digestive fire, removes the blockage in the channels and thereby aids in minimizing the disease.

Elucidation and exemplification of fasting in various diseases: (Table 1)

### Jwara

Jwara, obscurely referred to as fever, according to Ayurveda, is considered to be a disease manifested as the result of accumulation of 'ama' [toxins] in the 'Amashaya' [the digestive system]. This results in the blockage of the bodily srotas [channels], thus, causing loss of appetite and loss of perspiration.

According to Acharya Vagbhata, langhana, i.e., fasting is of prime importance, when the disease is in the purva roopa avastha. [prodromal stage] (4).

Sushruta Acharya opines that, when jwara is of alpa doshaja [caused as the result of mild variation in bodily humours] and when the patient is weak, upavasa should be given utmost priority

(5). Further, he also states that when the agni [digestive fire] is not stable as a result of the movement of the humours, langhana [fasting] is to be advised (5). And also, in the initial stages of the disease, langhana [depletion therapy], in terms of upavasa [fasting] is the best line of management. The bala [strength] of the patient should be given prime priority, as the protection and restoration of bala itself is stated to be the goal of any treatment (6). As the accumulated toxins will have enveloped the digestive fire, just as the ash covers the fire, the patient suffering from jwara should continue fasting till all the toxins are removed from the body.

The science of Ayurveda describes different avasthas [stages] during the course of manifestation of the diseases. Likewise, in jwara the classics explain ama and pakwa avasthas which can be very obscurely considered to be the initial and the subsequent phase of the disease respectively. Langhana [depletion therapy] is said to be the best line of management in the initial phase of the disease. Even though the depletion therapy includes various other modalities like therapeutic emesis, therapeutic purgation, exposure to sun...etc., langhana, in the form of upavasa i.e., fasting is the one that has to be followed, when the disease is in the initial or prodromal phase. During this phase, the doshas [humours] are associated with ama [metabolic toxins] and these amayukta doshas [toxin embedded humours] adhere to the body tissues. Fasting gains foremost priority in this phase as it facilitates the 'paka' [liquefaction] of the toxins associated with the humours, further leading to the dissociation of the impurities from the tissues, which are the paramount prerequisites for the planning and administration of other treatment modalities.

Furthermore, when fasting and other dietary restrictions are not able to effectuate the paka [liquefaction] effectively, medicines which are capable of mitigating the tastelessness, quench the thirst and which are hridya [beneficial to the heart] can only be administered.

According to Acharya Haaritha, even though pipaasa nigraha [controlling of thirst] is considered to be one among the several depletion therapies described in the classics of Ayurveda, it has to be very cautiously adopted under crucial conditions, as water is the prime supporter of life and controlling or avoiding it is harmful to health (7).

**Table 1.** Therapeutic indications of fasting in different diseases with respect to the stage or phase of the disease and the duration of fasting as explained in the classics of Ayurveda

Disease	Stage/phase	Duration
Jwara (fever)	Prodromal stage Alpa doshaja (mild variation in bodily humours)	a/c to the strength of the patient and the intensity of the disease
Vataja abhishyanda (conjunctivitis)	-	3 days
Atisara (diarrhoeal diseases)	First stage; where in there is association of metabolic toxins	till metabolic toxins get digested.
Pratishyaya (rhinorrhoea)	Jeerna avastha with fever (chronic condition)	-
Chardi roga (vomiting)	-	a/c to the strength of the patient and the intensity of the disease
Visoochika (gastroenteritis)	After Vamana (Therapeutic Emesis)	with due consideration to the strength of the patient

**Netra roga [eye disorders]**

Acharya Dalhana, while explaining the treatment of Vataja Abhishyanda [conjunctivitis] quotes the opinion of Videha, which states that the person suffering from the disease should fast for 3 days or food can be given only during the night time (8).

**Atisara [diarrhoea]**

Fasting is the line of management in the first stage of atisara [diarrhoeal diseases], wherein there is association of ama [metabolic toxins] in the body. Fasting, by virtue of its qualities, promotes the digestion of toxins and paves way for further treatment.

If diarrhoea is more watery and in large quantity, then emesis should be induced under medical supervision and this has to be followed by fasting (9).

**Nasa roga [nasal disorders] with special reference to pratishyaya [rhinorrhoea]**

Fasting followed by the administration of carminative medicines is advised in case of Jeerna pratishyaya [chronic rhinorrhoea], associated with fever, vomiting, body ache, heaviness, tastelessness, diarrhoea...etc.

**Chardi roga [vomiting]**

Ayurveda considers chardi [vomiting] as a disease rather than a mere symptom. It has been explained that it is due to the pathology associated with amashaya [gastrum-stomach] which is the sthana [seat] of Kapha dosha. Thus, langhana [depletion therapy], in terms of Upavasa [fasting] is said to be the best line of management of the disease. However, fasting has to be advised considering the rogi bala [the strength of the patient] as one needs to sustain both the disease and the effect of fasting (10).

**Visoochika [gastroenteritis]**

Acharya Sushruta opines that fasting should be advised to patients who are in severe distress as the result of vomiting and diarrhoea, after Vamana [therapeutic emesis], with due consideration to the strength of the patient (11).

**Relation between Upavasa [fasting] and the Roga bala [intensity of the diseases]**

- Fasting is considered to be the treatment of choice in diseases of milder intensity.

- Fasting should be associated with the intake of digestive stimulant diet in diseases with moderate intensity
- In diseases with maximum intensity, fasting should be advised and associated with the purificatory procedures

The duration of fast depends upon the dosha involved; it is longer in Kaphaja disorders and shorter in those due to Vata dosha.

And also, the time of the day, the season, the characteristic features of the particular land, the severity of the disease, the strength of the patient, his age, are all to be considered while advising fasting.

However, the classics put forth the fact that a clever physician should advise fasting to the subject until niraama lakshanas such as reduction of symptoms, proper excretion, proper salivation, lightness of the body and mind...etc., appear (12). They have elaborately and exceptionally explained the concept of fasting along with the signs and symptoms of adequate, excess and inadequate fasting with a view to aid the physician administer apt and accurate treatment and thereby help the individual attain perfect health and thereby the fourfold bliss, Dharma (righteousness), Artha (wealth), Kama (gratification of desires), Moksha (salvation) (13).

**The symptoms of adequate, excess, inadequate fasting can be summed up as follows****Signs and Symptoms of proper, adequate fasting**

- Proper elimination of urine, flatus and faeces
- Feeling of lightness in the body
- Feeling of freshness/ purity of heart, throat and mouth
- Proper belching
- Disappearance of drowsiness and exertion
- Appearance of sweat
- Excessive hunger and thirst with taste for food
- Tranquility of mind

Astanga hridaya of Vagbhata wondrously explains the same as the benefits of fasting and further adds bestowment of clarity of sense organs, enhanced digestive capacity, enthusiasm, decreased signs and symptoms of diseases (12).

**Signs and Symptoms of inadequate fasting**

- Increased kapha dosha
- Excessive salivation
- Frequent expectoration

- Loss of taste
- Malaise

### **Signs and Symptoms of excessive fasting**

- Cracking pain in joints
- Cough, dryness of mouth
- Anorexia, loss of appetite, excessive thirst, excessive belching
- Impairment of the power of hearing and sight
- Loss of strength, memory
- The classics of Ayurveda which have explained and expounded the concept of fasting, have also intricately elucidated the conditions where fasting is contraindicated. They are:
  - Diseases due to increased Vata dosha
  - In cases of antra vrutti [i.e. Hernia] [sushruta], as it increases Vata (14).
  - Subjects with excessive hunger and thirst
  - Emaciated/weak, very young, very old, pregnant lady
  - Those with excessive anger, jealousy and such other psychological extremities ...etc.,

And also, there are certain codes of conduct the person who is undertaking fasting should follow.

The contraindications during the execution of fasting include:

- Application of oil to the body and scalp
- Beautifying oneself
- Day sleep
- Indulgence in sexual activities
- Walking long distances
- Smoking, consumption of alcohol...etc.,

However, feasting prior to and ulterior to fasting is not recommended (15).

Ayurveda advocates the intake of freshly prepared rice gruel, which is easy for digestion and a good appetiser soon after fasting. The drugs to be administered during fasting should be; light for digestion, hot, dry, subtle, fast acting/ sharp, fluid in consistency.

Thus, the classics of Ayurveda have endorsed and esteemed the concept of fasting through exhaustive explanations and innumerable illustrations.

### **Conclusion**

The concept and canons of fasting are so very much incorporated and interlaced in the vast science of Ayurveda that it advocates, acknowledges and admires depletion therapy, which

includes Upavasa / fasting, as the best treatment modality a physician should adopt, by stating, "langhanam paramoushadam". This emphasises the therapeutic importance of fasting, besides its preventive virtues.

Furthermore, the constant exposure of human beings to numerous toxic substances through water, food, air, medications...etc., in conjunction with increasing life style disorders and sensory overload in today's dynamic world, have increased the rate of toxin accumulation in the body. As the natural process of elimination and cleansing become inadequate and ineffective, the means of fasting boosts up the psychosomatic health with the aid of its preventive and curative values.

Thus, the science of Ayurveda endorses and establishes the importance of Upavasa, in terms of fasting and separate chapters are dedicated to the same in texts such as Charaka Samhitha, Astanga Sangraha, Astanga Hridaya while Sushruta Samhitha, Bhavaprakasha, Bhaishajya Rathnavali...etc., elaborately explicate the same at various instances.

Thus, this is an earnest attempt to summarise the therapeutic importance of fasting, as described by the voluminous classics of Ayurveda.

The realisms of the classics, thus, demand intense apprehension and immense admiration.

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