

Concept and Canons of Fasting in Ayurveda

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ARTICLE INFO

Article type:

A Review Article

Article history:

Receive: 06-Jan-2013

Revise: 02-March-2013

Accept: 24-Feb-2013

Publish: 01-July-2013

Keywords:

Ayurveda

Fasting, depletion

Preventive

Therapeutic

ABSTRACT

Ayurveda, manoeuvres mankind to head a healthy life in order to pursue four-fold bliss. With a view to combat physical and mental annoyances, classics have explicated two-fold therapeutic modalities; langhana/depletion and brihmana/nourishing. Upavasa /fasting is one among ten depletion therapies explained. It is envisioned at all three levels of Ayurvedic therapies-rational/objectively planned, psychological, and spiritual. Fasting is reckoned to be refraining from all forms of food intake for a given period, under supervision of a qualified physician. Acharya Charaka advocates fasting in diseases of milder intensity, in those due to aama (metabolic toxin), after purificatory procedures. Fasting person should avoid beautifying oneself, day sleep, sexual acts, and feasting prior and ulterior to fasting. Fasting is contraindicated in very young, elderly, emaciated, pregnant lady, and shortly after strenuous exercise. The principle avers that fasting kindles metabolic/digestive fire which, in absence of food, brings about paachana of vitiated doshas, thereby riposting health. Sound fasting ensues proper elimination of excretory wastes, clear belch, sweat, and taste for food. Benefits of fasting include lucidity of sense organs, lightness of body and mind, control of diseases, and enthusiasm. Yoga Shastra describes fasting with respect to three levels of food: physical, impressions, and associations and a means to unite three bodies: astral, physical, and causal. Ayurveda thus advocates fasting depending upon the dosha, agni, vaya, kala, and bala of the individual, as a preventive as well as therapeutic modality.

► Please cite this paper as:

Adiga SH, Adiga RS. Concept and Canons of Fasting in Ayurveda. *J Fasting Health*. 2013;1(1):37-40.

Introduction

India, the salient land of ancient civilizations and treasured medical heritage, is the abode of Ayurveda, the authenticated, codified knowledge system pertaining to life science, health, and cure. Ayurveda is the ultimate art of holistic medicine. The science reckons the importance of health in pursuing the four-fold bliss, Dharma (righteousness), Artha (wealth), Kama (gratification of desires), and Moksha (salvation). (1)

The classics explicate that the body and mind constitute the substrata of diseases and the vitiation of Vata, Pitta, Kapha, somatic doshas and Rajas, and Tamas the mental doshas result in various diseases. (2) The two-fold therapeutic modalities explained include: 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 and causes lightness of the body. It comprises of four types of elimination therapies (therapeutic emesis, purgation, decoction enema,

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and nasal inhalation/installation), control of thirst, exposure to wind, exposure to sun, consumption of digestive stimulants, fasting, and physical exercise. (3)

Definition

Ayurvedic classics delineate fasting as Upavasa. It is defined as abstinence from all the four forms of food: chewing, licking, swallowing, and drinking (4) The act, however, should be executed in a systematic form, under medical supervision.

Contraindications during fasting:

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

However, feasting prior to and ulterior to fasting is not recommended. (5) 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, and fluid in consistency.

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 and produce aama (metabolic toxins), which is the root cause of all diseases. They together block the minute channels of the body which result 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.

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 similarly explains the benefits of fasting and further adds bestowment of clarity of sense

organs, enhanced digestive capacity, enthusiasm, and decreased signs and symptoms of diseases. (6)

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, and excessive belching
- Impairment of the power of hearing and sight
- Loss of strength, memory

The classics of Ayurveda, intricately explain that fasting is contraindicated in:

- Diseases due to increased Vata dosha
- Subjects with excessive hunger and thirst
- Emaciated/weak, very young, very old, and pregnant lady
- Those with excessive anger, jealousy, and such psychological extremities

Fasting is indicated in the treatment of diseases such as fever, conjunctivitis, vomiting, cough, diarrhoea, skin diseases, herpetic, urinary disorders, obesity, diabetes, abscess, splenic disorders, and disorders of the head and neck. (7) Adding to this, Acharya Sushruta explains fasting in the context of indigestion and the diseases due to aama. (8)

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

Similie: "Just as the atmospheric air and the heat dry up the small water bodies on the surface of the earth, the act of fasting increases the air and fire components in the body, which in turn, dry up the mildly vitiated doshas."(8, 9)

Fasting should be associated with intake of digestive stimulant diet in diseases with moderate intensity and purificatory procedures in those with maximum intensity. The duration of fasting depends upon the dosha involved; it is of longer duration in Kaphaja disorders and shorter in those due to Vata dosha. 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, and lightness of the body and mind appear.

A healthy individual can benefit from fasting to the optimum level by observing it in Shishira Rtu (late winter). This season is also best suited for therapeutic fasting and even in the diseases due to vitiated Vata dosha. Moreover, the time of the day, season, characteristic features of the

particular land, severity of the disease, strength of the patient, and age, are all to be considered while advising fasting. (10)

Ayurveda considers human beings to be the tripod of body, mind, and soul. Thus, it believes in three levels of therapies;

- a) Yukti vyapashraya – rational/objectively planned – for physical ailments including various therapeutic modalities
- b) Satvavajaya – psychological – for mental disturbances including meditation, yama, and niyama
- c) Daiva vyapashraya – spiritual – for ailments whose exact causes cannot be traced including subtle, religious, and occult methods such as homa, upavasa, and mantra

Fasting is envisioned in all levels of therapies. Yoga shastra adds to the above view and explains that a proper fasting can bring about union of all three bodies: the astral body/spirit, the physical body, and the causal body with the mind and emotions, thereby optimizing the ability to reach a higher state of consciousness.

Ayurveda considers Upavasa also as “aho ratri bhojana abhavaha”, i.e., the state of overnight deprivation of food and there is also mentioning of Upavasa as “sarva bhoga vivarjitaha”, i.e., withdrawal from all worldly pleasures. (11) (The human body seldom cleanses and rejuvenates itself by completing a mini-fasting every night and eliminating the metabolic wastes the next day. These refer to the physical and mental aspects of fasting, respectively.

And also, the Yoga Sutras of sage Patanjali incorporates eight major limbs, of which the fifth limb, Pratyahara, literally means "control of ahara". Yoga Shastra describes three levels of food;

- a) Physical food – which nourishes the body
- b) Impressions and sensations – which nourish the mind
- c) Associations - the bondage which nourishes our soul and influences the satva, rajo and, tamo gunas (12)

Thus, fasting touches all the virtues of the tripod of human life.

Conclusion

In the present global scenario, human beings are constantly exposed to numerous toxic substances through water, air, food, and medications along with increasing lifestyle disorders and sensory overload. This increases the rate of toxin accumulation in the body. Thereby, the natural process of elimination and cleansing is not sufficient to keep oneself healthy. This boosts up the importance of fasting in both preventive and therapeutic contexts.

Ayurveda advocates that “langhanam paramoushadam”, i.e., depletion therapy, which includes Upavasa/fasting is the best treatment modality a physician should adopt. The science owes such wondrous importance to this concept that separate chapters are dedicated to the same in texts such as Charaka Samhitha, Astanga Sangraha, and Astanga Hridaya while Sushruta Samhitha, Bhavaprakasha, and Bhaishajya Rathnavali elaborately explicate the same at various instances. The realisms of the classics, thus, demand intense apprehension and immense admiration.

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