



Agni - the power of our digestive fire

"You're not what you eat, you're what you digest."

The ancient and wise rishis of Ayurveda were masters of digestion (among other things), and their knowledge was intended to be applied and adapted as humans evolve. Over thousands of years of focused study, observation, and experimentation, their cumulative awareness helped to develop a model of living that honors the rhythms of nature. They discovered that the more we live in alignment with the qualities and cycles of the day, the month, the season, and our own life cycle, the healthier our digestive system remains/becomes, and the healthier the rest of our tissues and systems become. If digestion is stressed, then the precious food we eat cannot be properly used to nourish our tissues and mind-body systems. Also, a robust digestive system is necessary for our GI tracts to properly eliminate, so that toxic digestive by-products and environmental pollutants don't become "stuck" in the body.

Ayurveda refers to digestive power, or digestive fire, as "agni." A disturbed agni is one of the main/root causes of all suffering and disease, whether physical, emotional, or spiritual. A balanced agni is the cornerstone of true health, as it is involved in all life functions, including transformation of food into energy that we need to survive, and ideally thrive. Our gut houses 70-80% of our immune cells, and has been dubbed the "2nd brain" due its complex enteric nervous system, which communicates constantly with our central nervous system/brain.

Balanced agni also provides clarity in all senses of the word, allowing us not only to think clearly, but also to understand unconditional love and our interconnectedness amongst one another and our true source. Our primary agni is found in the GI tract but it is also present in every cell of our bodies. From a Western perspective our primary agni is comprised of the microbiome, the mucosal lining of the digestive tract, and enzymatic systems.



Below is a list of recommendations to help support your agni, whether it be too slow (manda), too sharp (tīkṣṇa), or variable (viṣhama). It is unlikely that addressing just one item will create a significant or lasting change, so it is recommended to start with at least 2-3 items (ones you don't already do) that make sense for your life now. And, as there is no such thing as perfect, don't fret when you stray off course...the goal is to incorporate these as much as you can, without stress. Stress is harmful to agni and our enjoyment in life, so try to adjust your perspective and focus on appreciating your successes ("I am what I am, not what I'm not")! As time goes on and these become more habitual and easier for you, you can start to add other guidelines. After a while, these will become second-nature. The goal is to slowly incorporate the habits that speak to you, NOT to make sure you're doing every single one, every single day. Progress, not perfection! Lastly, as much as possible, consider these guidelines as acts of self-devotion rather than self-discipline.

The information on this handout is for educational purposes only and is not a substitute for medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment.



Daily Habits to Support Agni

Food:

1. Incorporate fresh and/or powdered digestive spices and herbs in meals, according to your constitution, current imbalances, or season. You can buy pre-mixed masalas or make your own! If duo-doshic (most of us are), look for overlapping herbs or ask me to expand on this! Spices aid in digestion, balance doshas (energy patterns), and help you feel satiated by the end of the meal, which can help prevent overeating and sugar or salt cravings. Here are a few suggestions:

- a. Vata/Fall or Early Winter suggestions (choose warming & grounding): cumin, celery seed, ginger root, black pepper, pippali (long pepper), mineral/rock salt, asafetida, fenugreek seed, turmeric, mustard seeds, coriander
- b. Pitta/Summer suggestions (choose cooling, grounding): cumin, coriander, fennel, celery seed, licorice, cardamom, cilantro, basil, mint, rose, turmeric (mild to moderate use), ginger (mild to moderate use)
- c. Kapha/Late Winter or Spring suggestions (choose heating, invigorating, drying): cumin, cayenne pepper, chili, dry ginger, black pepper, pippali (long pepper), cinnamon, turmeric, mustard seeds, coriander

2. Avoid mindless grazing between mealtimes. If you're truly hungry between meals, select a whole food snack, such as a handful of nuts, fresh seasonal fruit, or cooked fruit (like stewed apples with cinnamon, cardamom, and/or clove). Fruit should be consumed no less than 30 minutes before a meal, and no less than 2 hours after a meal, as they should ideally be eaten alone.

3. Limit refined sugar.

4. Avoid or limit pre-packaged food; even things like "healthy" snack bars. Packaged food lacks Prana/life force and often contains ingredients that tax digestion. As a substitute for convenient snack bars, try making your own energy balls (aka ladoo) and notice how different you feel eating store-bought versus homemade. See handout for recipe!

5. Avoid or limit leftover food. But in reality we often rely on it, so avoid eating leftovers more than 2 days old, and "enliven" the meal after re-heating with fresh ground black or long pepper (pippali). Also opt to re-heat on a stove/oven rather than a microwave when possible.

6. Choose in-season, local, organic produce/food when possible

7. Cooked food is easier to digest than raw food. For example, sauteeing or steaming is easier on digestion and contains more Prana (life force) than frying or broiling. Raw food (like salads) are the highest in Prana BUT require a robust agni in order to digest it properly. If you have any symptoms of indigestion (gas, belching, pain, constipation, bloating, etc.) it is best to generally limit or avoid both raw and fried food while working to strengthen agni

8. Use high quality ghee, olive oil, or coconut oil for cooking



Daily Habits to Support Agni

Fluids:

1. Warm water: sip a warm cup of water before any other food or drink each morning upon waking. This gently stokes your digestive fire and gets it ready to digest more complex things. This can also help move toxins out of your GI tract, and can help stimulate a morning bowel movement. ALSO, sip on warm water throughout the day. This can include herbal tea specific to your constitution, or a tridoshic, agni-supporting tea like CCF (seeds of coriander, cumin, & fennel). All liquids should be warm or at least room temperature. Colder liquids are OK after vigorous exercise or during hot months, but avoid ice!
2. Avoid drinking too much fluid during and immediately after meals. While some fluid intake is expected, too much will dilute the digestive fire/strength (AKA agni). A general rule: at the end of the meal the stomach should be $\frac{1}{2}$ full of food, $\frac{1}{4}$ full of liquid, and $\frac{1}{4}$ full of air/space.

Rhythm:

1. Eat at regular times. Breakfast by 8am, lunch between 11:30-1pm, dinner between 5-7pm. Ensure there are at least 4 hours between meals. And try to be done eating each day by 7pm, whenever possible. If you experience indigestion at night, try eating a smaller, simpler meal, and/or finish eating by 6pm. Lunch should be the largest/most complex meal of the day, as this is when our agni is strongest.
2. Do not eat if you aren't truly hungry. It is important to build and maintain a healthy appetite. If it is meal-time, and you are not hungry, you can try stimulating your appetite with a few minutes of pranayama, a short walk, OR by eating a tiny slice of raw ginger w/a squeeze of lime juice and pinch of rock salt (though pitta-aggravated individuals should avoid the ginger appetizer). It is better to skip a meal (especially breakfast or dinner) if you aren't truly hungry. It will likely ensure you will be truly hungry by the next meal-time! If you consistently have no true appetite, please consult with your health provider or schedule a consult with us.
3. Eat in a calm, relatively quiet setting. Limit reading, watching TV, or talking while eating, especially avoiding negative or extra stimulating content. Focus on the flavor, texture, temperature, and appreciation of the food in front of you. If you are eating with someone keep conversation positive or neutral. Aim for eating 1-2 meals per week alone in silence or with calm music. Avoid eating while driving or moving.
4. Avoid or limit over-eating. It is easier to prevent over-eating if you chew completely and eat slowly, and stop eating when you feel satisfied/satiated. Eating beyond our true satiation point strains our digestion and results in the production of harmful ama/toxins (in this case, undigested food). At times you feel overly full, you can aid digestion by taking a short, gentle walk after eating; just 100 steps is all you need! You can do this and/or sit on your knees in vajrasana for up to 15 min following a meal.
5. Daily movement! Sweat if you're able!
6. Daily pranayama. There are many kinds of breath practice that specifically help to improve agni, like agni sar, kapalabhati (skull shining breath), and bhastrika (bellows breath). Schedule a breathwork consult if you're interested in learning these more advanced and incredibly supportive pranayamas.

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