

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF AYURVEDA360



**AYURVEDA
360**

**PEER-REVIEWED
BIMONTHLY JOURNAL**



ISSN

PRINT:

3048-7382

ONLINE:

3048-7390

2025

VOLUME 2

ISSUE 2

**SEPTEMBER-
OCTOBER**

| www.ayurveda360.in/journal

Ayurveda and Nutrition: Integrating Ancient Āhara Concepts With Modern Dietetics

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Abstract

Introduction: Āyurveda, an ancient Indian medical system, emphasises individual constitution (prakṛti), digestive fire (agni), seasonal fluctuations (ṛtucaryā), and dietary incompatibility (viruddhāhāra) in its holistic approach to nutrition and health. As metabolic syndromes and lifestyle-related disorders become increasingly common, Āyurvedic dietetics provides a valuable foundation for personalized and preventive nutrition. This explores the six tastes (ṣaḍrasa), food energetics (vīrya), and post-digestive effects (vipāka), which are the core concepts of Āyurvedic nutrition. Their relevance to contemporary nutritional research is examined.

Methods: By comparing modern nutritional theories with ancient Āyurvedic concepts, the study finds areas of convergence, such as gut health, chrononutrition, and mindful eating.

Results: It then makes recommendations for integrative strategies that combine traditional wisdom with empirically validated techniques. By improving individual health, this combination also contributes to social and economic development.

Conclusion: As a result, this study attempts to relate Āyurvedic āhāra to the modern diet.

Keywords: Pathyāhāra, Apathyāhāra, Āyurveda, Nutrition, Āhāra

Access this article online	
Quick Response Code: 	Website: www.ayurveda360.in/journal
	International Journal of Ayurveda360
	E-ISSN : 3048-7390 Print ISSN : 3048-7382
	Volume 2 Issue 2 : September-October 2025
	DOI: 10.63247/3048-7390.vol.2.issue2.10 DOI URL: https://doi.org/10.63247/3048-7390.vol.2.issue2.10

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How to cite this article:

Chandrakar N., Chandrakar R., Bhagat P. Ayurveda and Nutrition: Integrating Ancient Āhāra Concepts With Modern Dietetics. Int J Ayurveda360. 2025;2(2):782-790. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.63247/3048-7390.vol.2.issue2.10>

Manuscript Received	Review Round 1	Review Round 2	Review Round 3	Final Updated Received
19/08/2025	29/08/2025	04/09/2025	29/09/2025	06/10/2025
Accepted	Published	Conflict of Interest	Funding	Similarity Check
11/10/2025	15/10/2025	NIL	NIL	2% (Turnitin)

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This journal is published under the tradename Ayurveda360, registered under UDYAM-KR-27-0044910			

Introduction

Nutrition plays a vital role in maintaining health, preventing illness, and promoting longevity. Despite the tremendous advancements in contemporary nutritional research, the traditional Āyurvedic method provides a more comprehensive and individualised approach to nutrition and health [1]. Food (āhāra), sleep (nidrā), and balanced living (brahmacarya) are regarded in Āyurveda—the “science of life”—as essential pillars of life (trayopasthambha), in addition to being sources of physical sustenance [2].

Āhāra-vidhi-vidhāna (principles of dietary regimen), ṣaḍrasa (six tastes), tridoṣa (Vāta, Pitta, Kapha), agni (digestive fire), and guṇa (qualities) are foundational concepts of Āyurvedic dietetics [3]. The balance of doṣa and agni, considered cornerstones of robust immunity and overall health, depends on an Āyurvedic diet (āhāra), which is seasonal and prakṛti-based (constitution-dependent) [4]. The concepts mentioned above highlight the significance of appropriate digestion and absorption, the qualitative impact of food on the body and mind, and the necessity of customised diets according to age, season, geography, and constitution (prakṛti) [5].

In contrast to the primarily quantitative focus of contemporary nutrition, Āyurveda emphasises the qualitative role of food in preserving homeostasis and preventing illness [6]. In the current period, when lifestyle illnesses like diabetes, obesity, heart disease, and

digestive issues are becoming more common, the Āyurvedic approach to nutrition offers important insights for both prevention and treatment [7]. Modern nutrition and public health research is becoming increasingly interested in ideas such as gut health, detoxification, seasonal and locally tailored diets, and mindful eating [8]. Additionally, the tailored nutrition concept of Āyurveda aligns with the current trend of functional foods and precision nutrition [9].

Because of this, interpreting traditional Āyurvedic dietetics in the context of modern nutrition not only connects traditional knowledge with current scientific understanding but also provides a thorough foundation for achieving holistic health [10]. The paper aims to critically examine the present relevance of Āyurvedic food and nutrition concepts, emphasising their potential contribution to sustainable health practices.

Āhāra (Traditional Dietetics):

Āhāra, along with nidrā (sleep) and brahmacarya (balanced living/self-control), is regarded as one of the three foundations of life in Āyurveda [11]. Āhāra in Āyurveda refers to food and nutrition, which are regarded as the most important components in preserving health and averting illness. In addition to being a source of energy, food is described in classical writings as an essential element that affects the equilibrium of doṣas (Vāta, Pitta, Kapha), dhātus (body tissues), and

ojas (the essential essence of immunity and vigour) [12].

The term “right quantity” refers to the amount of āhāra that does not adversely affect an individual’s health. The food (āhāra) is reliant on agnibala, or the strength of digestive fire. Āhāra is essential to a person’s everyday existence, and its disruption results in a number of illnesses or ailments that are detrimental to the body.

Āhāra Vidhi-Vidhāna (Principles of Dietary Regimen):

Dietary guidelines for a healthy digestive system are recommended by Āyurveda:

- Consume food that is fresh, warm, and easy to digest.
- Eat in moderation and only when hungry (mātrā).
- Avoid irregular and excessive eating.

• When eating, one should be in a relaxed frame of mind.

• For balance, include all six flavours (ṣaḍrasa).

Six Tastes (Ṣaḍrasa):

Six tastes are identified in food, and each one differentially influences the doṣas [13].

- Madhura (sweet): Nourishes, increases Kapha, and pacifies Pitta and Vāta.
- Amla (sour): Boosts Pitta and Kapha and stimulates appetite.
- Lavaṇa (salty): Enhances taste, increases Kapha and Pitta.
- Kaṭu (pungent): Improves digestion, reduces Kapha, and increases Pitta and Vāta.
- Tikta (bitter): Lowers Pitta and Kapha and detoxifies.
- Kaṣāya (astringent): Absorbent, reduces Kapha and Pitta, and may increase Vāta.

Table 1. Interconnection Between Agni and Āhāra

Concept	Description
Agni Breaks Down Āhāra	A regulated agni is necessary for the effective digestion and utilisation of food (āhāra).
Āhāra Feeds Agni	Agni is strengthened and maintained by a healthy, proper āhāra. It is weakened by poor eating choices.
Weak Agni Causes the Formation of Āma	Āma (toxins) are created when food is only partially digested due to weak or inconsistent agni.
Health Is Maintained by Strong Agni	Immunity, vitality, and clarity are the results of efficient digestion and metabolism ensured by strong agni.
Āhāra Is Incompatible	Overeating, undereating, or eating at the wrong time may upset agni and cause imbalances.

Table 2. Influence of Āhāra (Diet) on Each Stage of Kriyākāla

Stage	Meaning	Effect of Diet
1. Samcaya (Accumulation)	Doṣas begin to accumulate in their typical locations (Pitta in the small intestine, Kapha in the stomach, and Vāta in the colon).	Food that is heavy, incompatible, or excessive causes a doṣa imbalance.
2. Prakopa (Aggravation)	Doṣas get even more agitated.	The imbalance is exacerbated by persistently poor eating habits.

3. Prasara (Spread)	Aggravated doṣas begin to disseminate and leave their places.	Eating while agni is weak or when indigestion is present distributes āma (toxins), which exacerbates systemic effects.
4. Sthāna Saṁśraya (Localization)	Weak or genetically predisposed tissues (dhātus) are where doṣas lodge.	Inappropriate eating causes doṣas to lodge in particular organs and inhibits tissue nourishment (dhātu poṣaṇa).
5. Vyakti (Manifestation)	Disease symptoms and indicators become evident.	Conditions such as diabetes, arthritis, and ulcers appear; progression is accelerated by ongoing dietary mistakes.
6. Bheda (Complication)	There are three types of disease: degenerative, complex, and chronic.	The prognosis deteriorates with prolonged nutritional imbalances. Contemporary analogues include metabolic syndrome and autoimmune diseases.

Table 3. Reverse of Kriyākāla via Dietary Modern Framework

Kriyākāla Stage	Ayurvedic Description	Modern Context Equivalent	Modern–Ayurvedic Integration
Samcaya (Accumulation)	Doṣas start to accumulate in their positions.	Mild imbalance: heaviness, bloating, and exhaustion.	Eat seasonal vegetables, limit snacking, and eat light meals. Begin with whole grains, ginger tea, and warm water.
Prakopa (Aggravation)	Doṣas get agitated or aroused.	Acidity, irritation, gas, and indigestion.	Use spices that reduce inflammation, such as cumin and turmeric.
Prasara (Spread)	Doṣas overflow and circulate.	Mild allergies and systemic inflammation.	Start with a mild detox (herbal teas, kitchari). Eliminate processed foods, dairy, and sugar.
Sthāna Saṁśraya (Localization)	Doṣas settle in weak tissues.	Onset of PCOS, eczema, migraines, and IBS.	Support the gut: fermented vegetables, buttermilk, and ghrta (ghee).
Vyakti (Manifestation)	The disease's symptoms become recognizable.	GERD, diabetes, and arthritis diagnosed.	Adopt a low-glycaemic, anti-inflammatory, and gluten-free diet when required.
Bheda (Complication)	As the disease progresses, it becomes chronic.	Chronic fatigue and autoimmune diseases.	Use Rasāyana therapy.

Agni and Āma: The Core Link Between Āhāra and Disease

- Food is transformed into energy and body tissues by the digestive fire (agni).
- Weak agni, due to improper diet, leads to the production of āma (toxic, undigested material).
- According to Āyurveda, the formation of

āma is considered the root cause of most illnesses.

- Examples include:

1. Junk food and irregular meals, which weaken agni and lead to prakopa and sañcaya.
2. Inappropriate dietary combinations (e.g., fruit with dairy)

promote sthāna saṁśraya through the formation of āma [14].

3. Persistently unhealthy eating despite symptoms may result in vyakti and subsequently bheda (manifest chronic diseases such as IBS, obesity, and arthritis).

Classification of Āhāra

According to Āyurveda, it is advised that āhāra be consumed in various forms:

- **Aśita** : Food that is eaten (solid food that is chewed and swallowed).
- **Pīta**: Drunk food (water, soups, buttermilk, milk, etc.).
- **Lehya**: Food that is licked, such as semi-solid preparations—e.g., herbal jams like Cyāvanaprāśa.
- **Cavya**: Foods that must be thoroughly masticated, such as fresh vegetables and nuts.
- **Līḍha**: Food that is licked or smeared; it often overlaps with lehya and is applied to semi-solid foods or therapeutic pastes.
- **Peya** : Drinkables such as soups, herbal teas, and decoctions.
- **Khādya**: A broad term for eatables, referring to food that is masticated and consumed.
- **Bhojya**: The main meal, consisting of well-cooked, staple foods like rice and wheat.

- **Bhakṣya**: Snacks, side dishes, or other items that are chewed or bitten.

These classifications reflect Āyurveda's detailed attention to digestive processes and the form in which food is consumed, aiming to enhance agni (digestive fire) and maintain balanced doṣas. Hence, this classification guides the structuring of a daily meal, typically including rice, pulses, vegetables, pāpada, salad, milk, buttermilk, cātnī, and sweets.

Pathya (Regular Proper Meal)

Rice:

- **Śālī**: Mutrāla, bālya, easily digestible, nutritive, and safe [15].
- **Millets**: Kapha-medohara, aid in weight management, improve metabolism, and lower cholesterol.

Pulses:

- **Mudga**: Bālya, pittahara, agnivardhaka; helps regulate blood sugar, supports detoxification, and has anti-inflammatory properties.
- **Aḍhaki (Arhar)**: Agnivardhaka, raktastambhaka, high in protein, and rich in iron.
- **Māṣa (Urad)**: Vṛṣya, rasāyana, vātā-nāśaka; beneficial in skin rejuvenation, muscle disorders, and joint pain.

Vegetables:

- **Kāravallaka (bitter gourd)**: Useful in madhumeha, acts as dīpana-pācana, mild laxative, supports

liver health, raktāśodhaka, and krimināśaka.

- Paṭola: Raktāśodhaka, useful in pitta-dominant fever, anulomana, agni-samyakāraka, beneficial in respiratory conditions.
- Moringa: Analgesic, anti-inflammatory, agnivardhaka, āma-nāśaka, dīpana-pācana, mutrāla.
- Ālabu (lauki): Hr̥dya-roga, blood pressure regulator, reduces cholesterol, helps in hypertension, and is diuretic.

Cāṭnī (Chutney):

- Āmla cāṭnī: Ojovardhaka, agnidīpaka, rasāyana, keśya, tvacya, cardiogenic.
- Dhaniyā: Detoxifying, digestive, helps in kidney ailments.
- Pudina: Cooling, carminative, and refreshing.
- Dhaniyā + Laśuna + Ādraka cāṭnī: Reduces cholesterol levels.

Laśuna (Garlic): Agni-dīpana, vāta-śāmaka, antioxidant, and appetiser.

Pickles: Dīpana, pācana, probiotic.

Sweets:

Balance Vāta and Pitta; examples include Āmla murabba (rasāyana), Pañcāmṛta, and Cyāvanaprāśa.

Salad:

Rocana, dīpana, balances tridoṣa, aids in weight management, cooling, and acts as a mild diuretic.

Khīra + Kākṛī + Black Salt: Beneficial in kidney diseases; diuretic and detoxifier.

Pāpada:

Protein-rich, dīpana, pācana, bālya, laghu.

Milk:

Bālya, rasāyana, improves sleep, oja-vardhaka.

Night consumption is ideal—it nourishes, calms the mind, and promotes sleep.

Buttermilk:

Dīpana, pācana, useful in grahaṇī, probiotic, and supports weight management.

- Buttermilk + Jīraka = Dīpana
- Buttermilk + Ajavāyana = Relieves colic and flatulence.
- Buttermilk + Hiṅgu = Helps in indigestion.

Food That Should Be Avoided (Apathya Āhāra)

Apathya āhāra refers to unhealthy or inappropriate dietary practices that disturb health and lead to disease. Eating too quickly, under stress, overeating, or skipping meals are major causes.

- Foods excessively hot, sour, salty, or sweet disturb doṣic balance when consumed in excess.
- Stale or overprocessed food: microwaved, canned, or leftover.
- Fermented foods preserved for several days may be unsuitable for some individuals.
- Deep-fried items (pakora), cold or refrigerated foods.
- Cold beverages, ice cream, and leftover food.
- Processed and junk foods—fast food, sugary cereals, canned foods, chips.

Reason: These foods contain preservatives and are considered low in prāṇa (life energy).

- Sweets and refined sugars: cakes, pastries, candies.

Reason: Cause weight gain, lethargy, and kapha aggravation.

Discussion

The growing acceptance of nutraceuticals and functional foods represents a significant area of convergence. The current emphasis on antioxidants, probiotics, and anti-inflammatory foods aligns with Āyurveda's concepts of pathya (wholesome diet) and rasāyana (rejuvenative foods and herbs). Āyurvedic principles such as sātmya (habitual appropriateness) and āhāra-vidhi (rules of eating) resonate with contemporary global movements toward plant-based diets, mindful eating, and promotion of "gut health."

In contrast to Āyurveda, which relies on holistic observation and experiential knowledge, modern nutrition emphasizes scientific evidence, randomized clinical trials, and measurable biomarkers [16]. Translational research—using tools like gut microbiome studies, metabolomics, and clinical nutrition trials—can analyze Āyurvedic dietary recommendations and bridge the gap between the two. Modern nutrition and Āyurvedic dietetics should thus be regarded as complementary disciplines rather than opposing perspectives. Modern nutrition offers scientific precision and

universal applicability, whereas Āyurveda provides a comprehensive, individualized foundation. In today's society—where obesity, metabolic syndrome, lifestyle disorders, and dietary deficiencies are prevalent—these two systems can enhance preventive and therapeutic health strategies when integrated.

Conclusion

According to Āyurveda, food is not only a source of nourishment but also auśadha (medicine) and the primary determinant of health, longevity, and disease prevention. Its dietary tenets—individuality, seasonal adaptability, and body–mind–spirit balance—remain profoundly relevant in managing lifestyle-associated disorders. Modern nutrition offers precise tools for quantifying nutrients and understanding biochemical processes, yet it often lacks Āyurveda's holistic and individualized insight. A more comprehensive approach to dietetics can be achieved by integrating contemporary nutritional science with traditional Āyurvedic wisdom. Such integration acknowledges both quantitative aspects (calories, proteins, vitamins, minerals) and qualitative attributes (rasa, vīrya, vipāka, and compatibility). This holistic synthesis can guide preventive healthcare, promote well-being, and improve management of chronic illnesses.

Re-examining Āyurvedic dietary principles alongside evidence-based nutrition can foster mindful eating, sustainable practices, and global health

progress. To create a balanced path toward holistic wellness, Āyurveda and modern nutrition should be embraced as complementary systems—where ancient principles enrich the precision of modern

dietetics. This study was undertaken to create awareness in society about āhāra (nutrition), as āhāra plays an essential role in both health and disease.

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