

Mahabhaishajya (Aahar) As Supreme Medicine- A Review Article

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Abstract

Introduction: According to Ayurvedic philosophy, the body, mind, and soul are nourished through proper food habits that align with individual *prakriti* (constitution), *deśa* (region), and *kāla* (season). Balanced and wholesome food maintains the equilibrium of *doṣas* (vāta, pitta, kapha), *dhātus*, and *agni*, which together form the foundation of health. The Ayurvedic principle of *āhāra* as *auśadha* (food as medicine) provides a holistic approach by integrating preventive, promotive, and corrective aspects of dietetics. **Methodology:** This article synthesizes classical Ayurvedic texts, contemporary nutritional science literature, and research on lifestyle diseases to explain the concept of *āhāra* as medicine. Textual references from *Charaka Samhita*, *Sushruta Samhita*, and relevant modern studies are reviewed to understand the principles of diet based on *prakriti* and 69 seasonal variations. **Results:** The review shows that dietary practices tailored to an individual's *prakriti*, season, and digestive capacity significantly contribute to maintaining *doṣa* balance and promoting metabolic harmony. **Discussion:** In today's fast-paced world, the rise of processed foods and irregular eating patterns has disrupted natural balance, contributing to lifestyle disorders. Ayurvedic dietetics offers a relevant and practical solution by promoting food choices that align with nature, season, and individual constitution. The collaboration between ancient wisdom and modern nutritional science shows that mindful eating is the foundation of lasting health.

Keywords: Āhāra, Ayurveda, Food, Agni, Pathya, Apathya, Aushadha

Introduction

The term *āhāra* is derived from the root “ahṛ” meaning “to take in” or “to nourish” [1]. In Ayurveda, *āhāra* represents not only food but every substance that sustains life

through ingestion. It is one of the *trayopasthambha* — the three essential pillars that support life, alongside *nidrā* (sleep) and *brahmacharya* (regulated lifestyle) [2]. According to *Charaka Samhitā*, appropriate consumption of food maintains health and promotes vitality, while improper dietary habits become the prime cause of *vyādhi* (disease).

Ayurveda defines health (*swasthya*) as a state of equilibrium among *dosha* (functional principles), *agni* (digestive and metabolic processes), *dhātu* (tissues), and *mala* (waste products), along with a state of mental and sensory well-being. Among the many factors influencing this equilibrium, *āhāra* holds a central position because it directly nourishes *dhātu* and maintains *ojas*, the essence of vitality. The *Charaka Samhitā* states that both the body and diseases originate from food. Hence, wholesome food taken with proper discipline sustains life, whereas unwholesome food is the root cause of all disorders [3]. *Āhāra*, when consumed appropriately in regard to *rasa* (taste), *guṇa* (quality), *vīrya* (potency), *vipāka* (post-digestive effect), and *prabhāva* (specific action), becomes medicine; but when consumed inappropriately, it acts as poison. The influence of convenience, processed food, and irregular meal times on eating is a trend that continues to grow in today's world; and is a contributing factor to many lifestyle diseases such as obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure, and digestion problems. In contrast to symptomatic treatment of disease, Ayurveda focuses on curing the individual with their diet in order for them to achieve optimal wellness, and it is their diet (*āhāra*) that is the most important factor in their overall wellness. Ayurvedic principles for *āhāra* provide complete guidance on what to eat, when to eat, how to eat and in what mental state you should eat. Therefore, looking at *āhāra* as *mahābhaishajya*, or the ultimate remedy, has significant implications for prevention, promotion and the cure of disease.

Aim

To explore the *Ayurvedic* concept of *āhāra as auśadha* (food as medicine) and evaluate how diet tailored to *prakṛiti*, *deśa*, and *kāla* contributes to maintaining *doṣa* balance, metabolic health, and prevention of lifestyle disorders.

Objectives

1. To examine classical *Ayurvedic* principles of dietetics as described in texts like *Charaka Samhita* and *Sushruta Samhita*.

2. To analyse how individualized dietary practices based on *prakriti*, season (*ritu*), and digestive capacity (*agni*) influence *doṣa* equilibrium and overall health.
3. To correlate *Ayurvedic* diet principles with modern nutritional science and contemporary research on lifestyle diseases.
4. To evaluate the role of mindful eating and seasonally appropriate foods in preventing metabolic imbalance and promoting long-term health.
5. To highlight the relevance of *ahara*-based interventions in modern times marked by processed foods and irregular food habits.

Methodology

This study is a conceptual review based on classical ayurvedic texts, standard textbooks, and contemporary literature. Primary sources included *Charak Samhitā*, *Suśruta Samhitā*, *Ashtāṅga Hridayam*, and major academic texts. Secondary data were obtained from peer-reviewed journals such as *ayushdhara* and *jaims* (journal of ayurveda and integrated medical sciences), along with other relevant scientific articles.

Review

Concept of *āhāra*

In Ayurveda, *āhāra* is not merely nourishment but the foundation of physical, mental, and spiritual health. Charaka describes it as the *prāṇa* (life force) of living beings, asserting that no happiness, strength, or life is possible without food. It is through the proper intake of *āhāra* that *dhātus* are formed, *ojas* is maintained, and *agni* remains in a balanced state, ensuring both growth and immunity. *Āhāra* also plays a vital role in the generation and maintenance of doshas: *vāta*, *pitta*, and *kapha*. Each type of food influences the doshas differently: *Guru*, *snigdha*, and *sheeta* foods increase *kapha* but pacify *vāta* and *pitta*. *Laghu*, *ushna*, and *tikshna* foods stimulate *agni* and reduce *kapha* [4]. Thus, an understanding of the properties of food allows one to maintain balance according to *deha prakṛti* (individual constitution) and *ritu* (seasonal variations). Ayurveda further emphasizes that food affects not only the body but also the mind (*manas*). *Sāttvika āhāra* (pure, fresh, balanced food) enhances clarity, calmness, and emotional stability, while *rājasika* and *tāmasika* foods cause agitation or lethargy. This highlights the psychophysical concept of diet unique to Ayurveda. Because of its multifaceted role, in the formation of *dhātus*, preservation of *agni*, maintenance of *ojas*,

and regulation of *doṣas*; āhāra is considered mahābhaiṣajya, the greatest medicine.

Classification of Āhāra

The classical texts of *Ayurveda* have classified Āhāra in multiple ways based on its source, physical nature, utility, and physiological impact on the body. This scientific classification allows appropriate dietary choices according to *deha prakṛti* (body constitution), *ritu* (season), *roga* (disease condition), and *ayushya* (longevity).

1. Based on Source (Yoni)

Āhāra is broadly divided into three categories [5] :

1. *Jangama Āhāra* (animal origin) e.g., milk, ghee, meat, eggs. These are *balyakara* (strength promoting) and *snigdha* (unctuous).
2. *Audbhida Āhāra* (Plant origin) e.g., cereals, pulses, vegetables, fruits. These provide *rasa*, *vīrya*, and *prāṇa* energy.
3. *Pārthiva Āhāra* (Mineral origin) e.g., rock salt, mineral water, certain salts and bhasmas used therapeutically.

2. Based on Physical Nature

According to *Charaka Samhitā* (*Sūtrasthāna* 25/36), āhāra is also classified as [6]:

1. *Ashana* (eaten solids) - food that is chewed, like rice, vegetables.
2. *Pāna* (drunk liquids) - beverages, milk, soups.
3. *Lehya* (licked semisolids) - jams, *chyanprash*, honey-based preparations.
4. *Bhakshya/Khadita* (bitten hard foods) - foods requiring mastication like nuts or fried items.

This classification ensures balance between *drava* (liquid) and *sthira* (solid) components of diet, which is essential for optimal *agni* functioning.

3. Based on Utility and Effect

Ayurveda further classifies Āhāra into two major types [7]:

- *Hita Āhāra* (Wholesome food): Nourishes body and mind, maintains *agni*, promotes strength and longevity. Example: ghee, milk, mung dal, seasonal fruits.
- *Ahita Āhāra* (Unwholesome food): Disturbs *agni*, vitiates *doṣas*, and becomes *Hetu* (cause) of disease. Example: fast food, reheated meals, excess oily or

stale food.

The difference between *hita* and *ahita āhāra* lies not only in the ingredients but also in the method, quantity, and time of consumption. Hence, even nutritious food can act as *ahita* if consumed improperly.

The concept of pathya and apathya ahara

Charaka states that pathya (the wholesome food) plays a significant role in relieving vitiated doshas and the srotas (circulation channels), and softening the srotas. In addition to listing many nutritional elements to be a part of the daily diet of healthy individuals, Charaka explains pathya and apathya (unwholesome food) in detail. He gives some examples of wholesome food such as; Shashtika rice, shali rice, mudga (green gramme), saindhava (rock salt), amalaka (Indian gooseberry), rainwater, ghee, animal flesh from arid regions, and honey. He also provides examples of foods that healthy individuals should avoid; such as the flesh of sick animals, dried vegetables, lotus roots and stalks, and vallura (stale or dried meat). [8]

Qualities That Make Āhāra the Supreme Medicine

Āyurveda recognizes that food possesses all the fundamental pharmacological principles found in medicines; *rasa*, *guna*, *virya*, *vipāka*, and *prabhāva*. When taken properly, these attributes act collectively to nourish *dhātus*, strengthen *agni*, and maintain *dosha* equilibrium.

1. Nourishment of Dhātus

The sequence of nutrition of the *dhātus* is initiated by *āhāra*. The nutrients from *āhāra* provide the necessary building blocks for the sequential development of the body's tissues (*rasa* → *rakta* → *māmsa* → *meda* → *asthi* → *majja* → *shukra* → *ojas*); without adequate *āhāra*, the sequence of *dhātu* formation is disrupted resulting in the loss of *dhātus* (*dhātu kshaya*) and diminished immunity. Therefore, *āhāra* represents the foundation for maintaining health and preventing disease [9].

2. Maintenance of Agni

Health is based on Agni as a main factor. A person's *agni* can be strengthened by proper nourishment and diminished (extinguished) by improper nourishment. In Ayurvedic medicine, a person with good *agni* is compared to a lighted lantern in that they sustain life. A good *agni* is neither too hot nor too cold. Therefore, the *rasa*, *vīrya*,

and *vipāka* of the foods we eat should be proportionate to our own *agni* so that there will be no metabolic imbalance. Therefore, eating is a therapeutic act [10].

3. Regulation of *Doṣas*

Each food item causes either a pacification or aggravation of doshas. *Madhura rasa* (sweet) pacifies *vāta* and *pitta* but increases *kapha*. *amla* (sour) and *lavana* (salty) enhance digestion but may increase pitta. *Tikta* (bitter) and *kaṣāya* (astringent) purify blood and reduce kapha and pitta [11]. This selective influence of food on doshas makes *āhāra* inherently medicinal. Ayurveda prescribes a specific order for enjoying the six tastes (*shadrasa*) during a meal to promote optimal digestion and balance of doshas. Meals should begin with sweet-tasting foods, as they are heavy and nourishing, helping to pacify *vata* and stimulate the initial digestive response. The sour and salty tastes should follow, as they further kindle *agni* (digestive fire) and enhance the secretion of digestive enzymes. The meal should conclude with pungent, bitter, and astringent tastes, which are light and drying in nature, helping to cleanse the palate, prevent excessive kapha accumulation, and aid in the final stages of digestion. This sequential intake of tastes ensures that all *Rasas* are balanced within the body, supporting proper assimilation, nourishment, and maintenance of dosha equilibrium [12].

4. Psychological and Spiritual Influence

Āhāra also shapes the *manasika bhāva* (mental state) [13]. *Sāttvika āhāra* (fresh, pure, mild food) promotes clarity and tranquility. Foods that increase the duration of life, purity, strength, health, happiness, and affection, that are succulent, oleaginous, enduring, and agreeable, are dear to those in the mode of purity. *Rājasika āhāra* (spicy, stimulating) induces restlessness and passion. Foods that are bitter, sour, salty, very hot, pungent, dry, and burning, are dear to those in the mode of passion, producing sorrow, grief, and disease. *Tāmasika āhāra* (stale, heavy, intoxicating) causes lethargy and ignorance. Foods that are not properly cooked, tasteless, putrid, and stale, and also remnants (of food eaten by others), and impure food, are dear to those in the mode of darkness. Thus, *āhāra* has therapeutic value for both body and mind, supporting Ayurveda's holistic vision of health.

Therapeutic and Clinical Aspects of *Āhāra* in Various Diseases

Ayurveda considers *āhāra* not merely a source of nourishment but a therapeutic agent, capable of both preventing and curing disease. The food is the foremost medicine - underlies all *Ayurvedic* clinical practice. Appropriate dietary regulation is as vital as medicine administration in treatment (*chikitsā*). The ancient texts describe specific *pathya āhāra* (wholesome food) and *apathya āhāra* (unwholesome food) for various diseases, forming an integral component of *ashtāṅga Āyurveda*.

[14]

1. *Āhāra* in *Jvara* (Fever)

In *jvara*, the *agni* (digestive fire) becomes weak, and improper food intake can exacerbate the *doshas*.

For a period of ten days, the patient should live on a diet of light food mixed with acid or non-acid soups or wholesome flesh-juice of *jāṅgala* animals, for the relief of fever.

Clinical Insight: In early fever, semi-liquid, warm, and easily digestible foods reduce gastric load and aid thermoregulation. As *agni* improves, light solids can be introduced gradually.

2. *Āhāra* in Cough and Coryza

The patient should drink the meat-juice of the goat prepared with long pepper, barley, horse-gram, dry ginger, pomegranate and unctuous articles. By taking this, coryza and other disorders disappear. The patient should be treated with the homologous diet out of the soups made up of radish or horsegram or out of the staple food made of barley, wheat or *shali* rice.

3. *Āhāra* in *Unmāda* (*Manovikṛitī*)

The medicated ghee is prepared with 256 tolas of ghee in four times its quantity of cow's urine along with the paste of 8 tolas each of asafoetida and the three spices.

Classical texts suggests:

1. Milk, ghee, meat soups of domestic animals
2. Light, *vāta*-pacifying diets
3. Medicated ghees

4. *Āhāra* in Alopecia and Grey hair

Ayurveda views *khalitya* (Alopecia) and *pālandu/śyāva palitya* (premature greying) as conditions arising primarily from the vitiation of *pitta doṣa*, often accompanied by *vāta* involvement, depletion of *rasa–rakta dhātus*, and weakness of *asthi & majjā dhātu*. Because the hair is considered an Upadhātu of *Asthi*, its nourishment depends heavily on the quality of diet.

1. Cooling and unctuous foods – milk, ghee, coconut water, pumpkin, ash gourd
2. *Rakta-prasādaka & keshya foods* – *amla*, *drākṣā* (grapes), pomegranate
3. *Dhātu-puṣṭikara* foods – black sesame seeds, dates, raisins, moong dal
4. *Medicated ghṛita* (for internal use) – *bhringarāja ghṛita*, *amalakī ghṛita*.
5. *Āhāra* in *arshroga* (piles)
6. The patient may take the soup of dry radish or of horse-gram or of wood-apple and bael with horsegram.
7. They may be given the meat- juice of the goat or of the quail group of birds, mixed with these soups and fruit-acid, butter-milk and astringent drugs.
8. Rice of the *rakta shali*, *maha-shali*, *kalama*, *langala*, white, autumnal and shastika varieties should form the dietetic regimen in piles. Thus has been described the line of treatment in the case of a patient suffering from piles associated with loose stools.

5. *Āhāra* in hypertension

High blood pressure is the increased pressure of the flowing blood on the walls of the blood pipes. As per *Ayurveda*, it can be caused due to increase of *vata* and *pitta dosha* in *Ayurveda*.

Here are various recommendations of food which can be taken on daily basis to keep a check on blood pressure levels:

1. Tomato: *deepan*
2. *Shastik Rice*: *laghu*, *tridoshshamak*
3. *Dhanyaka* (Coriander): diuretic
4. *Mudga* (Moong Dal): *deepan*, *laghu*, anti-oxidants
5. Apple: *kapha-pittashamak*
6. Jowar (Sorghum): *laghu*, *kaphapitta shamak*
7. Bajra: *laghu*, *deepan*.

6. Āhāra in *prameha* (diabetes)

In *Prameha*, *kapha*, *pitta*, *mamsa* and *meda* are excessively increased, which ultimately diminishes digestive fire. Undigested food products called *aama* is produced, which leads to producing tissues and waste products with *aama* [*sama dhatu* and *sama mala*].

To expel *Kleda* from the body, *Ayurveda* recommends roasted barley, wheat, and popped grains, as they are light, dry, and absorb excess moisture. *Barley* (*yava*) is especially useful, dry, astringent, with *katu vipāka*, it reduces *kapha* and *meda*, clears urine, stimulates digestion, and stabilizes tissues. Foods like *ragi*, green gram, red gram, old rice, sesame, mustard, jamun, bitter vegetables, honey, and small grains are also dry and light, making them suitable for *prameha*. wood apple (*bilva*) absorbs *kleda* and reduces thirst, vomiting, cough, and dyspnea. *Jamun* is ideal for *pittaja prameha* but should be avoided in *vātaja prameha*.

Honey absorbs *kleda*, enhances digestion, and tones tissues. Popped grains nourish without increasing moisture. Roasted meat supports muscle tissue, while meat with wet gravy increases *kleda* and should be avoided. [14.1]

7. Āhāra in *Pāṇḍu* (Anaemia)

Anaemia, also known as “*pandu roga*”, is believed to be caused by *doshic* imbalance, especially *pitta dosha* or deficiencies in vital energies. *Pathya āhāra*: Black sesame, jaggery, pomegranate, beetroot, leafy vegetables, and old rice with ghee.

1. Iron-Rich Foods - Include foods such as spinach, kale, fenugreek leaves, lentils, chickpeas, beans, and pumpkin seeds, sesame seeds, almonds to boost iron levels.
2. Vitamin C-Rich Foods - Vitamin C enhances iron absorption. Add citrus fruits, berries, and bell peppers to improve iron uptake. [14.2]

Versatile Dietetic Formulations in Ayurvedic Treatment

A. Medicated ghees -

Medicated ghee is pure cow ghee infused with potent medicinal herbs and *Ayurvedic* formulations. Unlike regular ghee, which is used in cooking, this version is created for healing purposes - both internally and externally. [15] The process involves simmering

ghee with herbal decoctions and pastes over a slow flame. This allows the fat-soluble and water-soluble properties of the herbs to get absorbed into the ghee. The final product becomes a carrier of deep healing and is easy for the body to absorb.

Common Medicated Ghees in Ayurveda: *Ayurveda* uses different medicated ghees (*ghritas*) prepared with specific herbs to support various health conditions:

1. *Ashwagandha Ghrita*: Boosts strength, stamina, and supports the nervous system; helpful for stress and fatigue.
2. *Brahmi Ghrita*: Enhances memory and mental clarity; reduces anxiety and supports brain health.
3. *Vasa Ghrita*: Supports respiratory health; useful in asthma, bronchitis, and chronic cough.
4. *Panchatikta Ghrita*: Detoxifying; helpful for chronic skin diseases, inflammation, and liver support.
5. *Triphala Ghrita*: Improves digestion, regulates bowels, and promotes eye health.

B. Honey as a vehicle

Madhu or honey is one of the primary medicines that are utilized throughout the entire practice of Ayurveda. Madhu or honey is used for both external and internal use in Ayurveda. Honey has been used to treat many eye issues, coughs, thirst, phlegm, hiccups, blood in vomit, leprosy, diabetes, obesity, worms, vomiting, asthma, diarrhea and wound healing. [16]. In several ayurvedic formulations, it also serves as a natural sweetener and preservative. It is also used as a vehicle along with other drugs to boost its efficacy or to lessen the adverse effects of the other medicines it is coupled with. It is also recognized to alleviate the elevated kapha dosha. It should also be kept in mind that fresh honey helps to enhance body mass while old honey promotes constipation and diminishes body mass. Honey should not be heated or consumed warm since it has harmful effects.

Result

The central argument of the article is that food is the foundational medicine in *Ayurveda*. This goes beyond simple calorie intake; it establishes *Āhāra* as the primary determinant of physiological and psychological equilibrium. The strength of this paper lies in its systematic exploration of this concept through the lens of classical *Ayurvedic* principles.

The most significant takeaway from *Ayurveda*, effectively articulated here, is the concept of personalized dietetics. Food's effect is not universal; it is contingent upon several factors, most notably the individual's constitution (Prakriti) and the strength of their *Agni*.

Discussion

Āyurveda views *āhāra* not simply as "food" for the body but as the *mahābhaishajya* ("great remedy"), or the great medicine; the basis of all physical strength, and the primary determinant of an individual's life-span. The authors of the Āyurvedic tradition were aware that virtually every disease state originates with and can be cured through appropriate use of *āhāra*. Thus when used correctly, *āhāra* functions as a dual function: a preventative and curative treatment method for restoring equilibrium of the doshas, and for maintaining the vigor of the *dhātus* and *ojas*. Contemporary clinical evidence and the combined experiences of traditional and modern practitioners reinforce these principles: for example, bland and easily digested gruel has been shown to cure fever (*jvara*); bitter and astringent foods have proven effective in managing diabetes (*prameha*); unctuous and warm foods are effective in relieving vata-related diseases (*vāta vyādhi*); and cool, alkaline foods are effective in alleviating acidity (*amlapitta*). Ultimately, the practitioner's role is not merely to prescribe medication (*aushadha*), but also to correct the diet (*āhāra*) as the first step toward creating optimal internal conditions for the restoration of homeostasis. The great medicine (*mahābhaishajya*) of *āhāra* cannot be replaced by any other remedy (e.g., *aushadha*). The concepts of *pathya – apathya āhāra* (correct vs incorrect diet) unite the preventive and therapeutic roles of *āhāra* within Āyurveda, and guide the practitioner in adapting his/her patient's diet to their deha-prakriti, agni-strength, and the current status of their *dosha-dhātu*. Each *āhāra* represents a tailored prescription. These time-tested concepts are increasingly being substantiated by contemporary nutritional sciences recognizing the therapeutic value of probiotics, phytochemicals, and functional foods identified as beneficial by the Āyurvedic tradition. The ability of *āhāra* to unite the body, mind, and environment into a single continuum ultimately determines its supremacy. Therefore, the wise doctor believes that awareness is the real healer, moderation is the best regimen, and food is the first medicine.

Conclusion

The article's conclusion is particularly relevant today. In a world dominated by convenience, processed foods, and lifestyle disorders (obesity, diabetes, hypertension), the *Ayurvedic* principle of mindful eating and *Pathya* (wholesome regimen) offers a practical, low-cost, and sustainable preventive healthcare model. *Āyurveda* views food (*Āhāra*) not just as nourishment but as the ultimate medicine (*Mahābhaiṣajya*) and the foundation of health. The core principle is that proper diet, tailored to the individual's constitution (*Prakṛti*) and digestive fire (*Agni*), balances the *Doṣas*, nourishes the tissues (*Dhātus*), and fortifies immunity (*Ojas*). The therapeutic power of *Āhāra* lies in its inherent pharmacological properties (*Rasa*, *Guṇa*, *Vīrya*, *Vipāka*). Consumed correctly, it prevents and cures disease in a sustained, gentle manner. Conversely, improper eating is the root cause of all disorders. In essence, correcting the diet (*Pathya Āhāra*) is the first and most critical step in healing—a personalized prescription that bridges preventative care and clinical cure, proving that mindful eating is the foundation of lasting vitality.

Acknowledgement – Nil

Funding Source - No financial support was revised.

Conflict of Interest – The author declares no conflict of interest.

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