



Eating For Your Constitution

The food we eat affects our body in profound ways and is an essential tool for regulating energy levels and maintaining balance between the mind, body, and spirit. The old saying, “you are what you eat” was not far off the mark. Food is the fuel that our bodies use to produce the energy we need to function in our lives. The trick is understanding your own body type and eating foods which support your constitution.

The first step is being aware of your own body and how such things as stress, lifestyle choices, environment, seasonal changes, and food selections affect how your body functions and feels. This helps to develop an intuitive understanding of how changes in these conditions affect your body and recognize food and lifestyle choices that will bring things back into balance. This article draws on an eclectic blending of both traditional Chinese and Ayurvedic (Indian) healing systems (over 3000 years old each) to understand your constitutional energy and how to choose and prepare foods that maximize your sense of well being and balance.

Assessing Your Constitutional Type

Much of the nutritional advice we hear about in our culture seems to emphasize a one size fits all for nutrition. The eastern systems of healing, such as the Ayurvedic and traditional Chinese systems, however, are based in understanding how our unique constitutional constellation, the environment, the seasonal changes, and other factors affect our sense of peace and balance. The idea is that understanding our own body and its processes and reactions teaches us how to live in harmony with the natural world around us. While there are commonalities that hold true for different constitutional types, there are specific modifications that help each constitution type avoid the health problems to which they are more prone. A first important step is determining your constitutional type.

Both the Ayurvedic and Chinese systems are ones that are informed by the natural world around them. The natural world is a teacher that is always showing us what happens when we are out of balance. Even more importantly, it shows us how to bring ourselves back into balance. Our bodies are really a microcosm of the natural world. Indeed, nature is the metaphor to understand both the physical and emotional characteristics of the people who embody these constitutional types. This imagery is present in the traditional Chinese five phases that classifies a person as either wood, fire, earth, metal, or water to understand the dynamic life processes and how they affect the physical body and emotions. Nature is also present in the three Ayurvedic doshas or humors (pitta - fire/water, kapha - water/earth, vata - air/ether) that are used to understand how the five elements



(ether, air, fire, water, earth) combine in the physical body. This article focuses on the tridoshic system.

The three Ayurvedic doshas, Vata, Pitta, and Kapha, offer a beautiful, practical, and simple way of understanding the body, both how it looks when in balance and how it looks when out of balance. Most importantly, they also offer the tools to understand how to restore balance. The three doshas are briefly described below to help you figure out your constitutional type.

Vata

Vata is composed of the elements of ether and air, which represent the expansion and movement of conscious thought. Its qualities can be described as dry, light, cold, rough, hard, and dispersing, and it is the seat of all movement in the body. Our breathing, our muscle movements and contractions, our heart beat, our nerve functioning, our digestion, and our elimination are all governed by Vata energy. A person with a Vata constitution tends to be thin and small framed with dry, rough and darker-toned skin, and runs cold. Their body frame tends to be irregular in stature and composition, either very tall or very short. A Vata person also tends to have a lot of nervous and restless energy, but usually tires easily. They have a quick intellect, but may quickly forget the thought. Emotionally Vata can manifest as adaptability and inspiration, as well as fear and insecurities. When Vata is out of balance it can lead to such disorder as anxiety and nervous conditions, depression, muscle spasms and tension, arthritis, insomnia, constipation, dizziness, mental confusion, migrating pains, and gas and bloating.

Foods should be warming, moistening, nourishing, and mildly spiced. Foods that can aggravate Vata energy in the body are addictive substances like caffeine and white sugar. It is important for Vata types to eat meals spaced at regular intervals to avoid hypoglycemia.

Pitta

Pitta is composed of fire and water and represents the metabolic fire that transforms things. Its attributes are hot, oily, penetrating, smooth, aggressive, and liquid. Pitta governs hunger, thirst, digestion, body heat, and the complexion. People with a Pitta constitution tend to be moderate build, weight, and height and tend to have balanced and proportional frames, with soft, oily skin that has a reddish luster or tone. They tend to gray easily and have soft yellowish or red hair and sharp penetrating eyes. They tend to have a courage and will power to see things through, as well as enthusiasm, however, this energy can also be expressed as aggression and anger. When Pitta is out of balance, it can be expressed in the body as heat and inflammation, fever, skin rashes, excess hunger or thirst, liver problems, ulcers, and difficult sleep.



Foods should be drying and cooling, with mild spices. Foods that can aggravate Pitta energy in the body are foods that are too spicy, salty, sour, or heating.

Kapha

Kapha is composed of water and earth energy and represents that which holds things together. Its attributes are heavy, slow, dull, dense, thick, soft, cold, sticky, and oily. It is the substance and support for our body and it governs lubrication, body fluids, taste, the joints, storing of energy, and stability and solidity. People with a Kapha constitution tend to have a thicker or bulkier frames, with smooth, soft, pale skin that tans evenly and big eyes with thick eyelashes. They move slowly (especially in the mornings) and tend to have an innate sweetness and be calm, steady, serious, which can also be expressed as passivity, greed, and attachment. When Kapha is out of balance it results in fluid stagnation and accumulation, lymphatic congestion, depressed digestion, nausea after eating, lethargy, cough, and weight gain.

Foods should be warming and drying and lighter, and spiced well. Foods that can aggravate Kapha tend to be dampening foods like flour products, dairy, salt, and oily or heavier foods.

We have our constitutional type or basic nature that we are born with, referred to as prakruti. This unique blending of the combination of the three doshas in each of us does not change throughout our life. People can be any combination of two types usually with one predominating, or even a balance of the three. It is important to keep in mind that we all have each of these three doshas in us and any one can become aggravated. Diet is one way of bringing balance back to your system. Prakruti is based on habits and proclivities consistent throughout your life, as well as more fixed or stable attributes, such as body frame, metabolism, height, weight, and complexion.

We also have our current state of health, referred to as our vikruti, which can change with age, lifestyle habits, food, level of stress, seasons, among other things. Vikruti is based on the symptoms you are currently experiencing. Usually, the element that finds itself out of balance does reflect the dosha in which we predominate. Meaning, if you are predominantly pitta, it is more likely that this element would be aggravated and to experience health issues that correspond to that element. Chronic conditions that have lasted for long periods of time can mask the prakruti and sometimes make it hard to understand what that is until the health issues are brought back into balance, much like peeling away the layers of an onion. Keep in mind there is an exception to every rule - which always and simply takes us back to honoring our own body wisdom.



Choosing What to Eat

Once you determine your prakruti and vikruti, you can use this information to assess the best types of food to eat and how to prepare it. Different things come into play when choosing foods to complement your constitutional type, such as the taste, the energy, as well as the climatic season.

There are some basic commonalities that are important for everyone to consider when preparing food. The digestive fires, referred to as agni in the Ayurvedic system, break down food and stimulate digestion. Simply put, the digestive system is a cooking pot that is composed of several different organs with a specific role to play in ripening and fermenting the food we eat and also in separating out the waste products from the purer parts our bodies will use to create energy. Food material that is not digested properly can create toxins, known as ama, which can accumulate and travel in the blood and affect the weaker organs in our systems, eventually leading to disease. Digestion is the most important function our bodies have and involves more internal organs than any other process our bodies perform. Eating cooked foods, as opposed to raw foods, as well as fermented (partially digested foods) foods are ways that give our body extra help so that it does not have to work harder to raise metabolic heat needed to digest food. Things such as drinking ice water and eating cold or raw foods all decrease the digestive fires and force the body to work harder to extract the nutritional value of food. Food is not what we eat but what we digest.

You can see this concept at work in many of the diets of traditional cultures. For example, the idea of including a fermented food with a meal is evident in the yogurt-based sauce, raita, that is served with Indian food, or sauerkraut that is served with meals in German culture. It is why water is better consumed at room temperature or preferably, warm to hot. Digestion could be impaired either by our metabolic fires burning too intensely, manifesting in such conditions as an ulcer or in being too sluggish, manifesting in such issues as being tired after eating.

Food also has a unique energy that can be influenced, but not changed, by the way it is prepared. It is best if the energy of the food one eats complements the energetic patterns of the body. In the Ayurvedic system, herbs and food are classified according to their energetic qualities (heating or cooling) and taste (salty, sweet, bitter, pungent, sour, astringent). The majority of food consumed should fall into the neutral range of the continuum, including things like whole grains, vegetables, and some meats, as it is important not to consume too many foods on either extreme. Food is also balanced with a person's constitution by following the principle of treating with the opposite energy. Simply put, damp conditions (like con-



gested sinuses) would be best aided by consuming more drying and astringing foods, while dryer conditions would be best served with more moistening foods. Luckily, this is all very intuitive, as we tend to gravitate instinctually to these healthy choices, unless we have become habituated to foods that aggravate our basic constitutions.

The key to using this system in daily life is first to understand your dosha type and become aware of how food and other factors affect your body. This process helps to develop the intuitive body wisdom to apply this information, with the ultimate goal to live a peaceful and balanced life.

Recommended Reading for More Information

[The Pocket Guide to Ayurvedic Healing](#) by Candis Cantin Packard

[Ayurveda: The Science of Self-Healing](#) by Dr. Vasant Lad

[Ayurvedic Cooking for Self Healing](#) by Usha Lad and Dr. Vasant Lad

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