



# Digestive FIRE

THE AYURVEDIC APPROACH TO HEALTHY DIGESTION THROUGH THE SEASONS

dr. stephanie peltz, nd

© Can Stock Photo Inc. / [tycoon]

Have you noticed that when the seasons change, your body goes through its own set of changes too? As temperatures cool you move indoors, crave more rest and sleep, and change the way you eat and digest. Many people even find their weight fluctuates with the seasons: they are a few pounds heavier in the winter and equally leaner in the summer. Did you know that, according to an age-old traditional model of medicine called Ayurveda, this is no accident? In fact, it's considered a healthy adaptation. Ancient wisdom can tell us a lot about how our bodies work, how to optimize our health, and how to address imbalances as they arise.

## You're on fire!

The seasonal changes you're noticing are a result of various complex natural rhythms in any healthy body. One very important factor in these shifts is known as the digestive capacity or "digestive fire". According to Ayurveda, this *agni* (Sanskrit for "fire") is what we use to transform food into fuel. In the *Sushruta Samhita*, an ancient Sanskrit medicinal text and one of the foundational treatises of the Ayurvedic approach, it states, "*sama dosha sama agnisha sama dhatu mala kriyaaha/ Prasanna atma indriya manaha swastha iti abhidheeyate*", which roughly translates to, "One maintains a balanced state when the main elements of the body (including *dosha* and *dhatu*), digestion (*agni*), and excretion (*mala kriya*) are in order with a contented mind, soul, and spirit."<sup>1</sup>

Sounds pretty good, *right?*

Ayurveda teaches a few key ways to develop strong digestive fire. It is believed that the right balance of food should be eaten and that stools should be regularly eliminated. Also, according to Ayurvedic teaching, it is vital to consume sufficient oils (like ghee) and eat a diet according to your Ayurvedic constitution. Further, it's important to vary eating habits based on the season.

You may have noticed that in summer you crave salads and in winter you've got a hankering for stew. According to the Ayurveda, there are natural times of year where digestion burns hot and times when it cools off, which makes sense when you snub your nose at a chilled soup in winter! Of course, there are also various external factors, like stress, that can lead to a strong or weak digestive fire. In Ayurveda it is thought that *all* disease occurs as a result of poor digestion and assimilation in the body!

## There's a Western explanation for that too

For those not accustomed to traditional approaches to healing, a Western analogy does exist. The concept of digestive fire can be thought of as the strength and volume of stomach acid, digestive enzymes, and bile in the GI tract. These juices work in concert to break down the food we eat into the necessary building blocks for energy and proper nutrition. In conventional medicine, we also see conditions where acid, enzyme, and/or bile production are ideal, too high, or insufficient. We don't often talk in terms of seasonal changes in Western medicine, but a familiar challenge like stress can absolutely cause a decrease in stomach acid or enzyme levels. We also know that imbalances in these vital fluids can run us into all kinds of digestive complaints, and lead to problems with skin, growth, immune function, and more.

In general, Ayurveda teaches us ways to help balance changes in seasons (and in us) so that we optimize our digestive fire. The ancient wisdom advises us to drink ½ cup of warm water *before* each meal to activate *agni* but to avoid drinking fluids *with* the meal as the liquid is

thought to douse the digestive fire and makes the process sluggish. This recommendation aligns beautifully with common naturopathic advice against drinking large amounts of water at meals as it dilutes the stomach acid and enzymes needed for digestion.

## Stoking your fire in winter

As for seasonal variations, it is early winter when our digestive fire is at its height. This allows us to better digest fats and proteins and the heavier foods that we typically crave around this time of year. Soups, broths, stews, cooked grains, and root veggies are all instinctive choices. On the other hand, winter is not an ideal time to eat cold and raw foods like salads. However, as winter wears on, we can get into trouble if we indulge in too many rich or heavy foods. The digestive fire may become sluggish and need more support. To maintain balance in late winter, add in things like cooked bitter greens such as dandelion, arugula, and kale; kitcheree, a simple, cleansing, traditional food; and warming spices like ginger, cinnamon, coriander seeds, cumin seeds, fennel, turmeric, cayenne, and black pepper. These foods will help the body carry through to spring.

So, if you are someone who notices your cravings change depending on the season, you're not alone. This is your body's wisdom telling you what to eat based on how you will be able to digest or assimilate it—an indication of your digestive fire. So go ahead and enjoy those winter grains, stews, and soups—your body needs it! •



© Can Stock Photo Inc. / [teoyekamoz]

## AYURVEDIC MEDICINE

Ayurvedic medicine is an ancient system of Indian healing and health. The word Ayurveda translates as "science/knowledge of life" and the practice dates back more than 5000 years. It is one of the foremost natural medical traditions and is considered a sister science to yoga. It addresses all aspects of health through assessing an individual's unique constitution. Ayurveda employs diet, herbs, and lifestyle recommendations for addressing imbalances and optimizing health.

See Dr. Heidi Lescanec's recipes for some inspiration in this department!