



Migraine Syndrome in Ayurveda

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Abstract

This article outlines my experience of migraine syndrome and eventual self-healing with Ayurveda. I had experienced my mother's genetic profile until discovering and implementing Ayurveda health principles, and hope this information will convey simple and effective ways of self-healing to the reader. You will learn how practical teachings on eating habits and lifestyle choices can help free you from pain, while gaining unexpected benefits.

Keywords

Ayurveda; Migraine syndrome; Lifestyle

About Ayurveda

Ayurveda, the world's oldest holistic health science, holds that a human being is precipitated from a higher, subtler consciousness, and has taken on 'coverings', called 'koshas' from Sanskrit, such as the human body. It is said to be composed of progressively denser elements: Ether (Space, Freedom), Air (Movement, Communication), Fire (Luster, Transformation), Water (Plasma, Cytoplasm) and Earth (Solidity, Manifestation).

Ayurveda describes the tripod of life as the unity of body, mind and consciousness. Ayurveda is an individualized science more than a standardized one, so migraine pain patterns and symptoms call for unique management according to the particular individual circumstances.

In the classical medical scriptures of Ayurveda, detailed descriptions are given of how the body's metabolic process of tissue building occurs, first from the superficial level of plasma to the deep reproductive tissues. But before studying the relevant psycho-biology according to ancient medical thinking, let me first introduce myself.

My Story

From the age of 17, I began experiencing regular, painful migraine headaches, just as my mother had. She had a drawer full of pills from the pharmacist and no relief after decades of 'treatment'. I was told that 'genetics' were responsible, which implied there was no cure. Yes, I followed in her footsteps with pain killers, vaso-constrictors and caffeine-based pills. Meanwhile, I continued a diet rich in white sugar, refined foods and some whole foods. Our milk was processed with synthetic hormones, though no link was made to these substances at the time. At about age 22, I became vegetarian and my health improved marginally, but the painful bouts still came several times monthly, accompanied by nausea and intense photosensitivity. A

clear hormonal pattern existed, though no self-care was offered from any public or private health care source to address my concerns. Xenoestrogens, caffeine, and stress were not discussed at the time. I began an increasing pattern of using over the counter painkillers, silently depleting my liver function, the very organ I later learned, I needed to be healthy to restore my systems.

While raising my children, I spent about ten years of self-study in naturopathy, western herbology and dietary science with a view to understanding and eradicating my headache/nausea/moodiness patterns. Yet, no adequate explanation or management strategy for migraine syndrome to end my suffering was found. I explored homeopathy, naturopathy, past-life regression and consulted many healers and practitioners.

At age 35, when I came to understand the Ayurvedic concept: that our physiology flows from our psycho-emotional and psycho-spiritual habits, my world began to shift. I began to understand about alkalinity and acidity as functions of 'ushna' (heating) or 'shitali' (cooling) or 'virya' (thermal effect) from Sanskrit. In addition, the concept of 'vipak' (post-digestion) further revolutionized my thinking. At last I could begin my journey of self-healing in earnest.

About two years were needed for my body and mind to adjust to the new food choices and scheduling, as I'd been ill with migraine syndrome for about 20 years at that time. Taking regular meals became an important key to unlocking my door to pain-free living and balanced blood sugar levels. This process involved a re-creation of my lifestyle and values, now putting my health first over work and the care of others, a revelation and revolution!

Perhaps this article will help you, dear reader, to avoid such a long healing curve. Along the way, I discovered that self-care is indeed my first responsibility, though I'd developed a distorted, externally-based value system of perceived 'shoulds', 'can'ts' and 'musts'. These concepts constrained my thinking, resulting in headaches, as mirrored in the battle of vaso-constriction and vaso-dilation pattern of vascular migraine. Think about your typical stress patterns with objectivity, and meditate on how you would like life to be. To change the effects calls for changing their causes. Focus on the solution, not the problem.

Part I

The doshas: vata (air & ether), pitta (fire & water) and kapha (earth & water)

Migraine is a pervasive imbalance involving all bodily systems, notably the nervous and vascular systems. Though mainly digestive in origin and cure, the structural, glandular/hormonal, nervous, excretory, and respiratory systems all need strengthening, according to Ayurveda.

Migraine syndrome is considered primarily a fault of pitta dosha, with vata dosha as a concurrent primary or secondary root cause. In some cases, kapha dosha is also involved as thicker blood viscosity and/or 'ama' (toxicity) dosha, from poor digestion. Therefore, burning of toxins ('ama pachan') and implementing pitta-pacifying food and lifestyle choices is a necessary first step for self-healing.

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Tissue formation according to ayurveda

Returning to the discussion of the 'dhatu' (tissue) formation process, Ayurveda offers great insights into self-healing. I learned that what we ate or experienced psycho-emotionally about 35 days ago, is today assimilating its qualitative essence into our aura or immune field, having influenced in turn, each of the seven main tissues levels of 'rasa' (plasma), 'rakta' (blood), 'mamsa' (muscle), 'meda' (fat), 'asthi' (bone), 'majja' (nerve), 'shukra' (male), and 'artava' (female) hormonal tissues. Thus, time is considered a causative factor in the disease and wellness processes in ancient Ayurvedic thinking.

Specifically, the food we eat and the thoughts, feelings and emotions circulating in the blood, form our primal human tissue, called plasma. In Sanskrit, the term 'rasa' conveys plasma and other meanings such as flavor, essence, enjoyment, and much more. Rasa is a term descriptive of our human experience, whether sweet, bitter or otherwise. The plasma, I learned from my main teacher of Ayurveda, Vaidya Vasant D. Lad, precipitates into a heavier substance, 'rakta', the blood. Rakta contains the heavier blood components, such as red and white cells, T-cells, fibrin and hemoglobin, etc. This metabolic maturation process from intake to assimilation takes about five days on average to metabolize from food and thoughts into plasma, toward metabolizing or precipitating to become the subsequent tissues.

This wonderful insight from Ayurveda of 'kala' or time, shows that herbal supplements, foods, and thoughts take a specific and predictable timeframe to repair their target tissues. For example, to begin to help heal the stomach lining (skin), at least five days is required once the cause is removed, to alkalize and begin to repair itself. To begin to heal nerve linings, at least 30 days of nutritional irrigation is required to begin the healing process.

Structural system

The body's bony structure is specialized for the protection of the central nervous system, including the brain, peripheral, autonomic, parasympathetic, sensory and motor systems. Thus, postural habits directly affect nerve function and therefore migraine syndrome, according to ease of circulation of 'prana' or life force.

Gentle daily stretching helps the spine and central nervous system to gradually align to center for flexibility. Abhyanga, or Ayurveda self-massage, using sunflower oil (cooling) or sesame oil (warming) helps to nourish and rejuvenate the body, strengthens the digestive, structural, and other systems. External application of oils rubbed into the skin with upward strokes along the muscles refreshes and energizes the whole body, including the head and feet. After applying warm oil to the entire body, one stands taller and breathes more deeply, thus better oxygenates the cells, resulting in an emotional, energetic and physical sense of well-being. Lymph is circulated in upward strokes, moving against the hair growth to help the oil penetrate the pores to the deeper skin layers. In Ayurveda, the skin's seven layers have functional affinity with each of the seven tissue levels, or 'dhatu's'. So, when the skin is massaged externally, the oil's properties and benefits penetrate deeply to the bones, nervous, and glandular systems conveying their restorative attributes to the deeper tissues. After 20 or 30 minutes of gentle stretching and self-massage in a warm place, shower without soap (except perhaps shampoo), and towel off with an old towel you can wash separately and throw away earlier than non-oil towels.

Now your body will begin to feel stronger and to build immunity. However, according to Ayurveda, it's best to save half your newly

found energy. The tendency to overextend oneself is associated with the manic tendencies of migraine sufferers. The middle path suggests maintaining a steady daily routine of morning exercise, breakfast and lunch on time, and evening meditation to prepare for daily deep rest.

Part II

Yoga therapy

After self-massage in the morning (except during menses for women), do gentle stretching and deep breathing to gradually bring awareness to your postural and circulatory needs. Give emphasis to bringing a cooling breath to your liver, brain and hormonal systems when rest is suggested, and a warming breath to your colon, kidneys and heart. Begin with about twenty minutes of stretching alignments, interspersed with periods of rest. Left nostril breathing is more cooling and right nostril breathing is more warming. After resting, the body and the mind will more easily become quiet for meditation and de-stressing. Do deep, full, silent, conscious breathing throughout, relaxing deeper and deeper with each silent inhale and exhale.

Meditation

Meditation facing east towards the sunrise is considered helpful and auspicious for spiritual progress. Remain in a comfortable posture for about twenty minutes or more with the back straight and the spine engaged. Allow the hands to fall symmetrically where they feel most natural. Empty the mind by watching it to express as it wishes, naturally inducing rest and rejuvenation. Worries and compulsions can thief away inner peace and haven't helped so far. So let them go now and let your mind rest. Your mind is yours and must obey its owner.

Meditation is always suggested as the first and last medicine in Ayurveda. Meditation leads to awareness of the root causes of suffering in the subtle mind and unresolved memory, while strengthening all bodily systems. You can buy relaxation but you cannot buy meditation, so begin to explore your inner landscape with curiosity and compassion.

Digestive system, appetite and assimilation

Migraine is mostly a pitta (excess fiery, hot, sour qualities) disorder, originating primarily in the small intestine and liver, where sour quality tends to accumulate. Excess sour taste can post-digestively corrode the nerve endings, weakening their sensory and motor functions. The pitta-soothing food choices, taken at a right time in right combinations, will help alkalize the cells in due course [1].

A shift in food choices takes about six weeks to transit all the tissue levels from plasma to blood, to muscle, then fat, bone, marrow/nerves and finally, to the hormonal or reproductive tissue. The process of irrigation of the tissues with supportive food choices begins to take effect in about five weeks on average (perhaps a little faster for those with vata type metabolism which tends to be more rapid and irregular, or slower for those with more kapha-type metabolism).

Each cycle of six weeks allows time for the deepening of the cellular repair. Detoxification from prior food habits (choices, timing, etc.) is relative to their prior duration. Cells now detoxify by themselves, but are not yet ready for "cleansing" which can trigger a setback. I learned when to consult a professional.

Blood sugar fluctuations accompany migraine syndrome, due to taking insufficient bitter taste in the diet and irregular daily habits. Often astringent and pungent tastes are also insufficient in the food/

herbal program. Bitter taste pacifies pitta, cleanses the liver, and helps regulate Ph cycles. There are many delicious choices of bitter taste other than coffee, which disturbs all three doshas [2].

Food choices are governed by the principle of 'shadrasaor' six tastes (sweet, sour, salty, bitter, pungent, and astringent), with the bitter taste emphasized, in the main meal of the day, to meet the main hunger of the day, at lunch or brunch, when digestion is at its most efficient. The bitter taste will help balance the blood sugar and support tissue efficiency. Lighter supper taken before 6pm, with all six taste represented, will also contribute to restored digestion and assimilation overnight.

Avoid eating after 6pm, or perhaps as late as 7pm for vata-secondary individuals. If you have emotional hunger, choose fruits such as purple grapes, sweet cherries, or blueberries, or tea of C.C.F. (equal parts or 1/3 tsp. each cumin, coriander, and fennel seed per cup of hot water). These will also help alkalize the nerve cells, and help support regular elimination. Bowel movements must be regular and complete, with no undigested food particles. Any constipation can trigger the migraine onset due to accumulation of toxins assimilating into the circulation. At your first opportunity, leave aside coffee, which is a vaso-constrictor and nerve irritant.

Other meals are best taken according to hunger up to about 6pm. Brunch and 'linner' are individually designed to regularize pancreatic function, emphasizing bitter taste. Taking a savory breakfast and light 'linner' will help balance blood sugar cycles. Of course, this calls for meal planning including shopping. Linner' is my word meaning early dinner. Linner is a smaller version of lunch, with all six tastes represented in the ingredients, some perhaps as healing spices.

Some kapha-secondary individuals will likely be hungry for only two meals a day, with perhaps the addition of a fruit snack to satisfy evening emotional hunger. If you have slower metabolism and report insufficient balance and satisfaction of digestive needs with two meals of six tastes daily, typically 10-11am and 5- 6pm., then you may be a Kapha secondary individual, and find that this rhythm supports regular elimination, an important and critical key to good metabolism.

I learned to take fruits and fruit juices strictly separately from other foods, to help avoid fermentation in the small intestine - one of the important causes of migraine. Excess fermentation in the small intestine can lead to erosion, ulceration, and bleeding of the delicate tissue wall and villi, and can lead to chronic absorption of acidic particles into the blood, which then irrigates, informs and irritates the deeper tissue formation process. Excess fermentation in the gut can cause irritable bowel syndrome, colitis, and parasitic overgrowth. Body and mind function together according to Ayurveda. Unresolved psycho-emotional states are causes that may become effects, perpetuating the syndrome.

Food of course can only satisfy physical hunger and cannot satisfy emotional hunger, whereas right understanding of our human emotional longings does perhaps more for inner. Meditation is the introversion of attention to quiet the mind, develop compassion, and clarify our perceptions and experiences.

Elimination

The daily elimination is very indicative of the entire digestive intelligence behind it. Color, consistency, regularity, and ease indicate well-coordinated vital enzymatic processes. Any irregularity such as

constipation, loose stool, undigested food particles or irregular form reveals a need for implementing re-balancing measures. Amalaki (dried, powdered Indian gooseberry) taken 1/2-1 teaspoons at bedtime (9pm or so) away from food with sufficient warm water, will gradually help normalize the G.I. tract's acid/alkaline balance, stool consistency and transit time, if taken while also following the pitta-soothing food choices. Normal elimination is passing a timely bowel movement on rising with no pain, strain, undue gasses or undigested food particles. Also, passing a second bowel movement after lunch, the main meal of the day, indicates good digestive health, according to Ayurveda. Ideally, the bowel movement floats, indicating vegetarianism.

Nervous, endocrine, and hormonal systems

Physiology according to Ayurveda provides great insight into the functions of 'majja dhatu'. Majja comprises all the nervous systems (central nervous system, sensory and motor systems, sympathetic and parasympathetic systems) - and also is inclusive of the marrow system, endocrine/hormonal system, the (fascial) system of connective tissue and the entire optic system. These specialized types of majja dhatu are governed by particular types of intelligence responsible for vata functions such as sensory communication and coordination. Specialized pitta functions such as recognition, luminosity, maintenance of color and temperature, are governed by majja dhatu 'agni' (metabolic intelligence).

Many migraine symptoms are optical, ophthalmic or visual in nature, involving photosensitivity and a nauseating type of pain pulsating from behind the eyes, from interactions of the functions of migraine syndrome. It's no wonder that the sufferer often retreats to a dark, quiet place to endure the pain alone, like I used to and avoid hostility to others. Anger management is a central goal of the migraine management program, to do self realization of unhealthy patterns. Meditation helps to find acceptance and harmony with the many situations we cannot control in life.

During acute episodes of migraine, the appetite may diminish. The body is trying to repair the nerve endings and may have aversion to digesting new food. Nausea can occur because of excess sour taste can accumulate into the lower stomach. Are there indigested thoughts, feelings and emotions? The liver and gallbladder may be producing excess bile, and will benefit from gradual detoxification and re-building, based in daily food and herb choices. Migraine is also associated with estrogen fluctuations in women, testosterone fluctuations in men and progesterone insufficiency in both. Progesterone-precursor rich foods such as yams and herbs such as 'Vidhari' are helpful to support normal hormone function. Note: Herbal supplementation is best done with professional supervision due to the complex nature of migraine and its healing stages.

Respiratory system

The simple inhalation and exhalation process that takes place during everyday living is often shallow and unconscious in the migraine patient. Deep, full, silent breathing through the left (cooling) nostril can often avert a migraine in the early stages. Oxygen deficiency is associated with migraine syndrome. Low oxygen can make the person feel sluggish and can trigger an event. Chronic low-grade iron deficiency anemia can be a factor in oxygen deficiency, especially where liver function is weak, as liver is the main site of new red blood cell production. Iron is required for healthy respiration.

Breathing exercises foster fuller oxygenation and circulation. Begin with deep, full, silent, mindful breathing with the intention

that healthy cells prevail. ‘Yakrut’ (liver) has accumulated excessive pitta toxins in migraine, according to Ayurveda. Thus, deep breathing and fuller oxygenation of the digestive organs is a most helpful habit to develop for refreshing the circulation. Practice deep, full, silent breathing with awareness of inner and outer relationships as a time-tested way to support longevity and quality of life. TIP: Keep your attention in the breath if stress occurs, for quick relaxation.

Sleep

The daily clock can be seen Ayurvedically. For example, in the early morning kapha qualities of dampness and coolness dominate until about 10am, when the warmth and hunger of pitta increases. After about 3pm, wind arises and people move about, resonating with the airy, changeable and expansive nature of vata. Similarly, in the evening, kapha brings the heaviness of sleep. If we miss the 10pm sleep cue, pitta can become over-stimulated, perhaps leading to burnout in due course. In deep sleep, the neurons and other cells undergo repair.

By following a natural diurnal cycle of awakening about dawn and winding down about dusk, the cardinal metabolic functions of appetite, elimination and sleep are most efficient. Adjusting my daily habits accordingly, helped me become more resilient to migraine.

Sleeping by about 9-10 pm helps avoid the neuro-stimulation that can occur any later. Meditation for 20-40-60 minutes before sleep will help wind down an active mind. Deep, full, silent breathing will help usher mental relaxation. Enjoy the deep benefits of an empty mind or the meditative state of pure being. Please remember, your mind is yours to maintain and refresh – no one else has this responsibility. Be willing to let go of your concerns, your attachment to demands and commands of carousel thoughts - the same thoughts going around and around in the mind. People somehow always say that worry, stressful thoughts have not helped them so far. Quiet mind brings restored mental clarity by itself.

Sleep taken before midnight is said to be worth two hours of after-midnight sleep. Deep restoration and repair of tissue is accomplished during deep sleep. By habituating to early sleep, one develops early rising without the jolt of an alarm clock. Upon early rising, one feels refreshed and enthusiastic. Early rising also supports patience and tolerance during the day. Impatience, frustration, and intolerance are both causes and effects of migraine. To break the cycle, at least regularly go to bed early, meditate to empty the mind, and enjoy deep restoration. Sleep is most effective when the stomach is empty and when the crown of the head faces eastward at night, provided this is not towards a toilet or drain.

Self-massage

Use an inexpensive oil such as warmed sunflower oil, apply all over the body from feet to the head, with upward strokes. This ‘abhyanga’ (self-massage therapy) practice is perhaps the most useful for westerners to adopt from Ayurveda to help rebuild health and immunity.

Keep rubbing in the oil during 20-40 minutes of stretching and intermittent resting. Give emphasis to the crown, spine, soles, navel and joints, using upward circular strokes. Abhyanga is nourishing, protective, restorative and rejuvenate. It bestows increased endurance, energy, immune power, and flexibility.

For bathing after, avoid the use of soap, except perhaps shampoo, to facilitate absorption going deeper during the day. Wash your oil

towel separately from other laundry, using a phosphate-free product specialized to remove oils.

Herbal supplementation

Herbs must be carefully chosen to address the individual symptom picture and history. When migraines are not resolved by the dietary and lifestyle adaptations discussed above, the temporary use of herbs as whole plants may benefit the sufferer [3].

Laboratory- isolated active ingredients and substances such as curcumin are not suggested in classical Ayurvedic management. Rather whole plants deliver the active ingredients safely and without side effects to the consumer. Plants have consciousness and affect the individual according to their qualitative characteristics, attributes and actions. Quantity or dosage is individualized according to weight, metabolic power, age, etc.

Herbal formulations are created according to individual pulse readings, and are not standardized in Ayurveda.

Note: Consult an experienced Ayurveda practitioner to help individualize your herbal supplement and food program.

Conclusion

Healing from Migraine Syndrome involves a deeper understanding of anatomy and physiology according to Ayurveda. Of no small importance is the willingness to shift many long-standing habits and beliefs. Appropriate food choices and timing, sufficient sleep taken at a right time (not daytime), and awareness of the psycho-emotional ‘digestion’ are critical to alleviating the symptoms of Migraine Syndrome. This involves resolving the metabolic tendency to produce excess sour taste in the body and mind. Life becomes a path of self-awareness and dedication to wellness, putting one’s own health first.

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