

An Ayurvedic approach to Obesity

by
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Obesity is a condition in which an individual is significantly overweight, and an excessive amount of body fat has accumulated under the chin and on the breasts, belly, buttocks, and/or thighs. Though it is not a serious case in itself, it may shorten the span of life, as well as create diminished efficiency and happiness. Obesity has become an epidemic in North America. Recent figures show that in the past two decades the number of overweight children and adolescents has doubled. Diabetes, heart disease, stroke, hypertension, high cholesterol, some types of cancers are major health risks due to obesity. Causes of obesity include overeating, excessive intake of heavy or cold food and drinks, oversleeping, lack of exercise, frequent snacking, eating processed food and leftovers, eating while multi-tasking and eating food that is not suitable to one's body type.

Ayurveda and its approach:

Ayurveda is 5000 year old and has a holistic approach to life. In Ayurveda, obesity is regarded as *medoroga*, a disorder of *meda dhatu*, which includes fat tissue and fat metabolism. According to Ayurveda obesity begins with imbalance of *doshas* (*Vata*, *Pita*, and *Kapha*), an imbalance of *agni* (digestive fire), an imbalance of the *malas* (waste products) or an imbalance of *shrotas* (microcirculatory channels). This collection of imbalances then interferes with the formation of tissues or *dhatu*s and leads to a tissue imbalance that we experience as excess weight.

From the Ayurvedic perspective, the key cause is found in lifestyle and diet choices that disrupt balance. Ayurveda views weight imbalance and obesity as something that should be corrected before it can contribute to other health problem.

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Ayurvedic word for digestion and metabolism is *agni*. Agni, when loosely translated, means fire. It actually signifies something much more than just fire and includes the idea of a precise and powerful functioning intelligence. Agni has remarkable transformative qualities. All the food we take in must be transformed into that which can be made useful by the body (nutrients) and that which is not needed (waste). The nutrients, or most refined products of our *agni*, are used to create the body's tissues (*dhatu*s).

The Vicious Cycle

There are seven *dhatu*s, and they are created sequentially. The creation of *dhatu*s is an ongoing complex process. The key word is *sequential*. If at any stage there is an imbalance, this disrupts the whole sequence of tissue formation. The *shrotas* or channels play a big role, because they carry the information required to properly form the tissues step by step. If blockages occur in the *shrotas* due to toxins (*ama*), an imbalance starts. According to Ayurveda to maintain balance and health strong *agni* and clear *shrotas* are essential.

From Ayurvedic perspective the cause of weight gains is cyclical. It begins with balance reducing choices in diet and lifestyle that weaken the digestive fire, which in turns increases toxins, clogging the communication channels *shrotas* and thereby disrupting the formation of tissues. The poorly formed tissue layers increases *meda dhatu* and an imbalance in *Kapha Dosha*. This in turn increases accumulation of toxins (*ama*), which leads to imbalance in *meda dhatu*.

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Accumulation of *ama* in *shrotas* causes an imbalance in naturally-flowing *Vata* energy.

Restricted or imbalanced *Vata* energy ends up increasing *agni* – the digestive fire – leading to an increase in appetite and thirst. This leads in turn to an increase in *Kapha Dosha* and *meda dhatu* and the whole cycle starts again.

To break the cycle, the Ayurvedic expert (*vaidya*) determines the unique nature of the individual (*Prakriti*) and the nature of imbalance (*Vikriti*). The essence of recommendation is generally comes down to addressing a few core issues: strengthening digestion (balance *agni*), removing *ama*, improving dietary habits and adjusting inappropriate daily routines and lowering stress.

Vata:

A balanced *vata* is creative, artistic, sensitive, spiritual and funny. When not in balance *vata* is nervous, anxious and restless. Stressful job or rocky relationship could lead to lack of sleep or worry, anxiety, fatigue and depression. *Vata* is associated with air and ether elements, which causes unstable mood and mind and as a result irregular appetite. *Vatas* becomes ultimate grazers, mostly because lack of routine and order to plan a meal. Eating lots of sugar calms the nerves as well as eating lots give *vata* a sense of security.

Pitta:

Pitta is driven, competitive, ambitious and constantly chasing the next goal. *Pita* is intelligent and razor-sharp focus. Hunger is very intense in *Pita*. But *pit*as frequently forget to eat and can't stop what they are doing to eat something healthy. They become absorbed in their task whatever they are doing. When it is time to eat *pita* overeats, and full of cravings, because craving is

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instantly gratified with ample of sugar, coffee and red meat. They become addicted to such food.

Weight develops muscle and flabbiness.

Kapha:

Kapha moves through life at a slow, methodical pace. They are calm, easy going, affectionate and content. *Kapha* is associated with earth and water elements. When not in balance this is the most common Dosha that develops obesity, slow metabolism, easy weight gain, continuous appetite (addiction to eat), hypothyroid or other hormonal conditions that cause retention of weight, mainly water and fat, weak pancreas and kidneys, low pulse and energy, excess phlegm, fat deposits and benign tumors may develop.

Guidelines:

Hydrate with warm water:

75% of Americans are chronically dehydrated. According to Ayurveda, warm water is a natural detoxifier. Warm water mops up impurities as it travels through over-taxed digestive system, sweeping away molecules left behind from partially digested food that could be slowing down what nature intended to be an enviably swift metabolic rate. Replacing sugary beverages like soda and fruit juices with clear warm water automatically reduces number of calories per day. Cold drinks cause the muscles and blood vessels in gastrointestinal tract to freeze and in turn vitiate digestive fire, which leads sluggish digestion. Warm water, on the other hand, relaxes the

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muscles and dilates the blood vessels. Dilation of blood vessels allows the assimilation and absorption of the contents of the meal to occur more efficiently.

Sipping water during meal is ideal. It helps digestion, absorption and *dhatu* building. The rule of thumb is drink $\frac{1}{4}$ of capacity of the stomach while eating. Drinking water before meal will dilute *agni*, which will hinder digestion and lead to weakness. Drinking water right after meal will increase *Kapha*, causing weight gain. Ideal time to drink water is right after waking up in the morning and one hour before and one hour after each meal. The quantity of water consumption varies with body type; *Vata* needs more water than *Kapha* type.

Drink a cup of hot water with a teaspoon honey and 10 drops of lime juice added whenever feel hungry will be a good substitute for eating and will help to melt the fat. (*The complete book of Ayurvedic Home Remedies by Dr. Vasant Lad*)

Mindful eating:

A study in the *British Medical Journal* has discovered that people who eat quickly are three times more likely to be overweight than those who take their time. While eating zoning out, watching TV, talking, driving, and multi-tasking undermine the digestive process and counteract the effort to lose weight. Mindful eating means it is about being conscious and present while eating. When food is eaten mindfully, the brain sees, tastes, smell and feels and sends signals to the stomach to release enzymes and juices to digest the food. According to Ayurveda, you are not what you eat but what you digest. The first stage of digestion starts in the mouth with *Bodhaka Kapha*. The moment that any kind of food or substance comes in contact with saliva

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(*Bodhaka Kapha*), the first experience is taste. Ayurveda says that taste has direct actions on *doshas*, so the moment you start eating food the process of digestion begins. The digestive process is governed by *agni* and certain subtypes of each three *doshas*. Usually six or more hours are required for the digestion of a meal.

In order to lose weight and reach optimal level of *agni* it is important to avoid the following:

- Avoid overeating and/or eating heavy foods in large quantities
- Avoid *tamasic* foods: Leftovers, processed, canned foods, fast food or food with additives and colorings
- Avoid ice cold water and drinks and cold foods
- Quit drinking alcohol and smoking
- Avoid cruciferous vegetables, fried foods and heavy foods
- Do not talk or laugh while eating. Do not eat on the run or while watching TV

In order to be healthy and increase the digestive power (*agni*) while losing weight, the following steps should be followed:

- Eat according to your body constitution –

Vata: *Vata* reducing herbs, diet and lifestyle, complex carbohydrates (whole grains and starchy vegetables), avoidance of refined sugar, fewer hot spices and more sweet digestives like cardamom, coriander, *brahmi*, *jatamanshi*, and *ashwagandha* calm the mind. *Guggul* helps cleanse and warm the body.

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Pitta: *Pitta* reducing foods, avoiding meat, fish oily, greasy, or fried foods, sugars, and desserts. Raw salads, green herbs, and chlorophyll, digestive bitters and bitter laxatives are the best foods to reduce weight and counter sugar addiction. Herbs include aloe vera gel, *katuka*, and turmeric.

Kapha: *Kapha* reducing food, avoiding refined sugars, salt, dairy, sweet fruit, bread, pastry, meat, fish, fruit juices, cold liquids, and oils. Spice teas, vegetable juices, steamed vegetables, beans, and whole grains are good. Suggestion includes less sleep, no naps, and strong, aerobic exercise. Hot digestive herbs like black pepper, ginger, turmeric, and *trikatu* burn up the fat and raise the digestive fire. Bitter herbs, like *katuka*, *triphala* and *guggul*, reduce fat and dry water.

- Eat fresh and seasonal vegetables and fruit.
- Eat freshly cooked warm food. It will strengthen *agni*, digest food better, reduces excess *Kapha* and *Vata*
- Eat food, which has enough oil, and is moist enough (not fried). It tastes better, helps *agni*, builds *dhatu*s, and increases strength.
- Do not eat food with wrong combination. E.g. Honey and ghee when combined in equal quantities is poisonous. Mixing sour fruits and milk curdles the milk.
- Eat only when you are hungry
- Eat three meals a day and avoid snacking

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- Eat light meals for breakfast and dinner and heavy meal during lunch time, have early dinner between 6:00 p.m. and 7:30 p.m.
- Eat after previous food is digested
- Eat with proper frame of mind – create pleasant environment
- Eating sequence: First eat carbohydrates or sweet taste, next eat salty, sour, pungent and bitter foods. Finally eat astringent food.

Breathing and *Pranayama*:

Due to fast passed life style many of us do shallow breathing. Practicing diaphragmatic breathing is beneficial. By simply observing the breath, we can be aware of what is happening inside. The more we become aware of breath, the disturbance, the negativity of the mind disappears and it becomes pure and peaceful. *Bhasrika* is a very powerful *Pranayama*. It strengthens the heart and lungs, improves the digestion and calms the mind. Right Nostril breathing (*surya bhedi*) will also be helpful.

Yoga:

Certain gentle yoga *asanas* are helpful, including the Palm Tree pose, and the Triangle Pose. Also, while sitting on the floor, bend forward as far as you can, with the goal of eventually touching the head to the knees. The Fish, Camel, Cobra and Cow poses are simple, helpful postures. (*The complete book of Ayurvedic Home Remedies by Dr. Vasant Lad*)

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10 minutes of Sun Salutations every morning is helpful. The “sun salute” is a complete Ayurvedic exercise, also known as *Surya Namaskara*. This series of postures simultaneously integrates the whole physiology including mind, body, and breath. It strengthens and stretches all the major muscle groups, lubricates the joints, conditions the spine, and massages the internal organs. Blood flow and circulation is increased throughout the body.

Herbal Helpers:

The following herbal formula will help lose weight.

- 3 parts *kutki*, 3 parts *chitrak*, 2 parts *shilajit* and 5 parts *punarnava* - take ½ teaspoon of this mixture twice a day with 1 teaspoon honey, before meals.
- In addition, taking 1 tablet of the following herbs all together, with warm water, 3 times a day after meals: *triphala guggulu*, *chitrak-adhivati*, *punarnava guggulu*.
- It is also helpful to take triphala every night. At least 1 hour after dinner, pour 1 cup of boiling water over ½ to 1 teaspoon *triphala*, let it steep for 10 minutes and drink.

(The complete book of Ayurvedic Home Remedies by Dr. Vasant Lad)

Conclusion:

Obesity is a common problem in North America. It is mainly due to improper lifestyle, wrong food choices and lack of exercise. Above all, people do not have a sense of self awareness.

They are taken by external factors, by their senses and do not give importance for their existence in this universe. They don't have mind, body and spiritual connection, and not even breathing right. Ayurvedic approach provides all the necessary tools to bring back health, harmony and

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peace in life. By adopting simple life style and healthy eating habits anyone can enjoy the life optimally without much stress or expenses. Possible diseases like diabetes, heart diseases, stroke, and cholesterol can be prevented. So much healthcare dollars will be saved. There will be happy and healthy people in a wealthy country!!

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