

## **Ayurveda and Immunity**

According to Ayurveda, strong immunity is a product of good digestion, strong agni (the metabolic fire), quality liver functioning and a balanced endocrine system (which includes appropriately balanced hormones). Immunity is also very much connected to a mysterious substance called *ojas*. The Sanskrit word *ojas* literally means “vigour”. In the body, ojas is extremely subtle and elusive, somewhat difficult to define. Yet in the Ayurvedic tradition, ojas has everything to do with immunity.

### **What is ojas in Ayurveda?**

Ojas is our life essence and the essence of our immunity. It gives the body strength, vigour, vitality and immunity. It is the superfine essence of all of the bodily tissues and the end product of perfect digestion.

As such, it is a direct reflection of the quality of the metabolic fire (agni); strong agni yields healthy ojas, while impaired agni hinders the production and quality of ojas. Ojas is also affected by past trauma, lifestyle choices, stress levels, the quality of our relationships and our overall state of consciousness.

Ojas is protected when we are able to live in the present moment with pure, detached awareness. When ojas is in balance, it shows up as optimal strength, positive immune reactions (i.e. the ability to fight off infections) and psychological stability. Healthy ojas foster a state of bliss.

Ojas gets diminished and dried up when we are overly effortful, stressed, contracted and selfish. When ojas is out of balance, it becomes visible as fear, anxiety, worries, depression, low body weight, low immune strength and imbalanced sense functions.

Ayurveda differentiates between two different types of ojas: *Para Ojas* and *Apara Ojas*. *Para Ojas* is the primary form of ojas of which the ancient texts say that we only have eight drops in our body. Any loss of these drops leads to death. *Apara Ojas* is the secondary ojas of which it is said we have one handful. A reduction of *Apara Ojas* leads to disease.

### **Challenges for our immune system**

Any virus needs a conducive environment to thrive. Different people with different immune strengths will present differently: some may be asymptomatic carriers, others will show mild symptoms and for others a viral infections such as Covid19 is fatal. Ayurveda differentiates between a base immunity that we were born with versus an acquired immunity. In either case, if you know that your immune system is weak, there has to be a willingness to make changes in your life in order to correct the underlying issues. This is the path of self-empowerment and self-responsibility which have to result in making healthier lifestyle and eating choices.

There are particularly vulnerable times when our immune system is naturally weaker and we need to be extra conscientious. These times include:

- Junctions between two seasons i.e. between summer and autumn, winter and spring etc. Any accumulated elements from one season (too much fire/heat in the body after a hot summer) will present itself in the next season as a disease or imbalance (prickly heat, acid reflux).
- During a general cold or flu season
- After a cleanse (extensive fasting, panchakarma, liver detox)
- Times of significant change (start of the school year when everyone's routine changes)
- Major life transitions (marriage, death, job loss, birth of a new baby)

As you can see from the list above, when Covid19 hit New Zealand we were at the junction between summer and autumn, about to hit the annual flu season and on top of all, the lockdown then pushed most citizens into involuntary and potentially stressful lifestyle changes.

In order to **not** weaken or stretch your immune system anymore at times like these, it is important to avoid the following things:

- Vāta aggravating food (i.e. cold, dry foods such as crackers, popcorn, cold drinks from the fridge, ice cream)
- Agni imbalances (an overactive, underactive or fluctuating digestive system)
- Fasting
- Alcohol
- Excessive physical exertion
- Sleep deprivation
- Excessive sexual behaviour
- Negative emotions

In this next section we will look into huge range of things that you can do to strengthen your immune system and to enable you to look after yourself in a time when there is no vaccine around.

### **Immune strengthening recommendations**

The Ayurvedic concept of *Rasayana* comes into play here. Rasayana is a way of life that maintains your energy level at an optimally high level. This is achieved through self-discipline and following the daily Ayurvedic routines (also known as dinacharya). Ayurveda states that you yourself are your friend or enemy when it comes to your own rasayana. At first glance, some of the recommendations below may seem quite basic. In fact, many of them are. Ayurveda reminds us that our bodies are inherently intelligent and given proper support, our physiology knows how to create balance and optimal health.

#### **1. Daily routine (dinacharya)**

Adopting a daily routine is a very purposeful and enduring act of self-love. Ayurveda places great importance on daily rhythms and offers the following morning routine. Over time, this context of predictability and safety encourages the nervous system to relax, reduces stress, encourages rejuvenation and helps to preserve immune function.

Establishing a daily routine is quite simple: try to awaken, eat your meals and go to bed at about the same times each day. If possible, you can also try maintain a consistent work and activity schedule. This level of consistency alone is very powerful.

**The night before** Try to be in bed by 10 or 10.30pm the latest (adjust this to suit your summer and winter rhythms). The body completely renews and detoxifies itself between the hours of 10pm and 2am.

**Rise and shine!** Generally, waking around sunrise is ideal. Upon waking, try to be aware of your body, your breath and a connection to gratitude. Ayurveda understands everyday as a diamond opportunity.

**Scrape your tongue** One of my favourite Ayurvedic health tools! Buy a tongue scraper or use an upside-down teaspoon and scrape your tongue from back to front a few times. Rinse the tongue scraper between each scrape. The tongue is a mirror of your intestines and all of your internal organs. If you notice a thick coating, it may mean you may want to eat a more cleansing diet, as toxins may be present. Tongue scraping has been shown to help prevent diseases of the oral cavity, improves your ability to taste and prevents bad odour in the mouth. Plus, if you do not get rid of that coating first thing in the morning, it will end up back in the body.

**Brush your teeth** Traditional Ayurvedic toothpastes contain neem, prickly ash bark and triphala with bitter and antibacterial properties.

**Wash your face, mouth, ears and eyes** Splash some cool water on your face and eyes. Hold water in your mouth for a few seconds and then massage your gums with warm sesame oil. This improves oral hygiene and prevents bad breath. Lastly, clean your ears so that all your sense functions are purified and ready to perceive the world untainted.

**Drink 1-2 cups of warm water** or make yourself a fresh lemon ginger honey drink. This helps to wash the GI tract, flush out the kidneys and stimulate good bowel health.

**Nature calls** Going to the bathroom upon waking will help clear your digestive system. A healthy motion will have a soft brown quality, little odour and will be well-formed like a banana. Undigested food, foul smell, mucous, blood, excessive dryness or completely loose motions indicate digestive imbalances.

**Get oily** Self-massage or “abhyanga” is one of your best allies for radiance. Massaging your skin daily nourishes and soothes the nervous system, stimulates lymphatic flow and aids in detoxification. It also improves circulation, boosts your vitality and makes you feel more balanced emotionally and mentally. Use a high-quality organic oil such as sesame, almond or coconut. Warm the oil in a water bath or in your hands, then rub down, making sure not to skip any parts. Let the oil soak in for at least 15-20 minutes and then shower.

**Time for your devotional practices and to get your body moving** Do whatever suits your mood, the season and your belief system. Yoga, meditation, prayer, prānāyāma, qigong, tai chi, a nature walk, a dip in the ocean, chanting, writing in your gratitude journal,

visualisation, mandala drawing or contemplation. When done regularly dedicating time to spirituality will bring many benefits in living a joyful and meaningful life.

**Nourish your belly** Eat a healthy, seasonally appropriate breakfast. The best time to eat is around 8-8.30am in the morning, which will give your *agni* (metabolic fire) time to be strong for lunchtime. If you are off to work outside your home, consider making your lunch while you make your breakfast. Put it in a thermos and take it with you. In that way, you are set for your day.

**Check your diary and turn your phone on** I know that for many of you this seems really late in the day (or that it may even seem impossible to keep your phone off for so long) but Ayurveda recommends to cleanse, nourish and connect with ourselves first before we connect with the outside world. In this way we maintain inner strength, endurance and an open heart for the demands of the outer world. Try it out and see what the quality of your day feels like following this routine.

Enjoy your day, your work and your responsibilities. Be productive and take regular breathing breaks. In the evening, have an early dinner around 5-7pm. Start winding down around 9pm, indulge in a foot or head massage, have a cup of chamomile tea, practice a moment of effortless awareness and go to bed early, so you can be fresh again for your morning routine.

## 2. Diet (ahara)

Tending to your *agni* (metabolic fire, digestive capacity) is the number one way to promote optimal health. The importance of a healthy digestion cannot be over-emphasised. In general terms, *agni* is supported by a diet that minimises stimulants, refined sugars, processed foods and leftover foods. Instead, emphasise healthy, fresh and whole foods. *Agni* is also strengthened when we eat with mindfulness and maintain a regular eating schedule i.e. eat your meals at consistent times from one day to the next.

The following types of food have immune enhancing properties:

Organic fresh milk and ghee are valued by Ayurveda due to their ability to stimulate *ojas*. Warm the milk before drinking it and add a pinch of cardamom to ease digestion.

All sweet and juicy fruits such as pears, peaches, plums, bananas, watermelon, oranges, grapes, dates and mangoes. They transform themselves quickly into *ojas*. Apples are also considered immune stimulating because they contain a rich amount of antioxidants, soluble and insoluble fibre which have a cleansing effect on the intestines.

All types of green leafy vegetables are also recommended to strengthen the immune system – spinach, kale, micro-greens, watercress, silver beet, bok choy, cabbage. When steamed or stewed with digestive spices such as cumin, mustard seeds, black pepper, garlic or ginger, they become a powerful immune stimulant. They provide the organism with calcium, iron and other valuable nutrients that have a cleansing effect on the bowels. Eggplant, pumpkin,

potatoes and radish are also great choices. So are broccoli, cabbage and cauliflower as they contain a lot of antioxidants and flavonoids that stimulate immunity.

Legumes such as mung beans (yellow, green) and urid dal are highly appreciated in Ayurveda because they are a valuable source of protein.

Whole grains, seeds and nuts such as rice, barley, quinoa, amaranth, almonds, pistachios, walnuts, poppy seeds and sesame seeds also have a positive effect on a weak immune system, because of the content of fibre and valuable nutrients which clean the whole organism from toxic substances.

As for meat, Ayurveda does not recommend it because it is too heavy to digest and therefore it creates toxins in the digestive tract (ama).

Enjoy basmati rice and mung dal kichari with vegetables. Hot food is good. It is better not to take cold drinks, iced water or ice-cold beverages. Best to avoid yogurt, cheese and ice cream. All cold foods will suppress your agni and dampen the fire if not put it out altogether! For that reason, have warm/hot food. Drink warm water, make a cup of hot ginger tea or kawakawa tea which is excellent for your agni.

### **3. Sleep**

Sleep is critically important for your immune system. Prolonged sleep deprivation weakens your body's defense system and thus renders you more prone to catch a cold or any other infection i.e. you are 45% more likely to catch a cold if you sleep less than 5 hours per night. Try to go to bed and get up at about the same times each day and aim to sleep for about eight hours each night or if you want to be more specific: people with a Vāta constitution should sleep for about 6-7 hours, Pitta dominant constitutions 7-8 hours and Kapha dominant constitutions 8-9 hours. Minimise your exposure to blue light (i.e. computer and phone screens) 1-2 hours before bed time as this disrupts the natural body clock by interrupting melatonin production, switch off your modem/wireless internet during the night and keep transmitting devices out of your bedroom or even better switch them off.

### **4. Appropriate exercise**

Exercise helps to release accumulated tension, move stagnant mental and emotional energy, and improve circulation. It also kindles agni, improves digestion, boosts the body's natural detoxification mechanisms, encourages proper elimination and supports sound sleep. All of these measures serve to protect ojas and support the immune system.

Ayurveda differentiates between appropriate exercise for Vāta, Pitta and Kapha. Vāta people should only engage in light exercise such as walking, yoga or dance. Pitta people who are naturally more competitive and hot-tempered do well with water and snow sports such as swimming, surfing, SUP, kiteboarding, skiing and snowboarding. Kapha individuals who have the most profound stamina can do vigorous exercise over a long period of time such as mountaineering, weights, ultra-marathon running etc. If you don't know your constitution

type, then apply the general rule that a daily twenty-minute walk can do wonders for your entire system.

## 5. Herbal remedies

There are a number of herbs in the Ayurvedic tradition that support the immune system as well as optimal lung function.

**Chyavanprash:** A traditional Ayurvedic herbal jam made of amalaki fruit and 41 other herbs. A rich source of vitamin C and antioxidants, Chyavanprash is a balancing formula that kindles agni and bolsters the immune system. A daily dose of 1-2 teaspoons of this nutritive jam can support energy, vitality and overall wellbeing. You can order a jar of 500g for \$36 through me.

**Sitopaladi** supports the proper functioning of the lungs and sinuses, encourages healthy expectoration, kindles the digestive fire and helps to burn excess kapha. This formula promotes clear, healthy respiration and is used for coughs, shortness of breath, chronic rhinitis, asthma and thoracic pain.

**Pippali** is pungent and heating in its effects. Pippali stimulates metabolism, burns natural toxins and helps maintain a healthy digestive environment. It is an excellent tonic for the lungs, supporting clear and comfortable breathing. Pippali nourishes the blood and promotes healthy circulation and supports a healthy liver.

**Guduchi:** The health promoting powers of Guduchi were so respected by the authors of the ancient Ayurvedic texts that they called it "*Amrita*" or "*Divine Nectar*." A powerful nutritive tonic Guduchi strengthens the tissues, bolsters immunity and promotes vitality while calming the mind and supporting proper function of the nervous system.

### **The following immune boosting herbs and spices you will find in your kitchen pharmacy:**

**Turmeric:** It bolsters the immune system and brain, purifies the blood and promotes clear, healthy skin. Turmeric strengthens digestion and eliminates natural toxins from the GI tract. It supports proper function of the pancreas and supports healthy blood glucose levels that are already within the normal range. Turmeric soothes and nourishes the joint tissue and promotes comfortable movement.

**Garlic** in your diet will offer natural support to your immune system. Garlic kindles agni, destroys natural toxins, encourages the maintenance of a normal body temperature, supports the lungs and clears excess kapha. Garlic clears harmful bacteria while preserving the body's natural, beneficial flora.

**Ginger:** Well known for its ability to stimulate and support the immune system. Ginger kindles the digestive fire, burns ama (toxins), promotes healthy expectoration, cleanses the blood and lymph, encourages healthy circulation and sweating, and removes excess kapha from the lungs.

**Kawakawa** has always played a significant role in Māori traditional healing. Pick a few leaves when you are out on a walk and enjoy a cup of herbal brew (boil for 15-20min and then strain) for its relaxing effects on the nervous system, congestion of any sort in the respiratory tract, for asthma, bronchitis, colds and chills, as a blood purifier and to aid digestion.

#### **6. Stress reduction and mindfulness practices (yoga, meditation, prānāyāma)**

Minimizing stress is an important strategy in boosting your immune system. Excess stress is detrimental to your immune system as stress hormones effectively suppress the immune system. Remember that your body's reaction to a stressful (or potentially life threatening) situation is to Fight, Flight or Freeze. This means your body reallocates vital resources to ensure your immediate survival. Therefore, reducing your exposure to stressful situations will preserve ojas and bolster your immune system.

#### **Yoga**

The word "Yoga" originates from Sanskrit and means "to join, to unite". Yoga exercises have a holistic effect and bring body, mind, consciousness and soul into balance. Yoga moves prana (our vital essence) in the body, helps to dissipate tension, clears stagnation and encourages fluidity throughout the tissues, the subtle body, the mental and emotional spheres. Yoga helps to develop a greater understanding of our self, the purpose of life and our relationship to God.

Ayurveda differentiates between what yoga styles are good for which constitution. The general rule is the gentler and calmer styles (ying, restorative) are more suitable for Vāta individuals and the more vigorous styles (yang, vinyasa) are better for Kapha. Pitta people should stay away from 'competitive' types of yoga and yoga in overly heated rooms. Recommended postures for everyone are camel pose, cobra, cow, boat, bow, bridge, locust, lotus and lion pose.

If you are new to yoga or don't know where to start, opt for sun salutations ("Surya Namaskar"). Here is a link to a personal refresher, filmed recently at the beautiful Wellington harbour entrance: <https://youtu.be/X-4inGjFi2s> Start with a minimum of 2 rounds and increase it slowly until you get to a maximum of 12 rounds over time as there are 12 important poses in Surya Namaskar. Then do prānāyāma and sit for meditation.

#### **Prānāyāma**

Prānā, the vital breath, plays an essential role in all yoga techniques and exercises. Research has revealed that most people breathe too shallow, without using the full potential of the lungs. Due to this, the body is inadequately supplied with oxygen. Metabolic function is reduced and as a result, physical wellbeing is considerably impaired. Through specific breathing techniques such as Nadi Shodhana (alternate nostril breathing), the breathing process becomes more conscious and deepens in a natural way. With regular practice, you can gradually learn to eliminate poor breathing habits and replace them with deep, relaxed breathing. Apart from the benefits to physical and mental health, there is also a clear improvement in the body's immune system and vitality. Click this link for a more detailed explanation of the different prānāyāma techniques:

<https://www.yogindailylife.org/system/en/pranayamas>

## **Meditation**

Meditation is an excellent way to increase your vibration and stabilise your moods, bringing you in deeper touch with your essence. Meditation has been proven in countless scientific studies to have benefits ranging from improved sleep, increased mind power, strengthened immune system, a healthier response to stressful situations and slowed down ageing — all of which help to protect ojas.

Even as little as five minutes daily of finding a quiet spot and relaxing your whole being can bring immense benefits. Over time, a daily meditation practice can truly re-pattern the brain. If you do not have a meditation practice, try this lovely ten minute meditation by Swamiji: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1FKYw2LoN1c&list=PLF0AB27064ECC0BD8&index=32>

## **7. Positive emotions and attitude**

Life changes and evolves, things “happen” and our day-to-day happiness fluctuates. Yet, emotional suffering is not a necessity, no matter what happens or happened to us.

Our digestive fire (agni) is responsible for digesting food. But there is actually an agni, or metabolic mechanism, in every cell of your body and with each subdosha. To understand how emotional processing works, we need to delve deeper into the functioning of Sadhaka Pitta, one of the subdoshas of Pitta, associated with the heart and the processing of emotions.

In Ayurveda, the inability to process emotions in a timely manner is seen as the main cause of emotional imbalances. So, the Ayurvedic emphasis is on efficiently processing emotions. Some people are able to process an emotion quickly which means they are able to let go and move on with their lives. Even right after a traumatic event, that person is able to think "Whatever has happened has happened, and I'm going to be all right". Ayurveda says this person has a balanced Sadhaka Agni. Saying yes to life means to surrender – to every thought, feeling and emotion. It means to let go and letting go is a journey toward the heart.

For others, the processing of thoughts is slower, so the negative impressions remain with them for a very long time and impact their current thoughts and emotions, resulting in a negative mood. Negative moods contract the mind. This contraction dries ojas and has a diminishing effect on your immune system. A person with low (imbalanced) Sadhaka Agni may remember a negative situation that happened years ago. If the emotion has not yet been digested or metabolised, it is still lodged in the heart and mind. This resistance in letting go, breeds fear and anger, making the consciousness heavy and rigid.

Ayurveda identifies a number of causes for low Sadhaka Agni including eating the wrong foods, weak digestion, a build-up of ama (toxins), living in an emotionally negative environment, being continually exposed to environmental toxins, or being surrounded by people who are not supportive. The solution to correct any imbalances in Sadhaka Agni is



the same as mentioned throughout this whole article: nourish wellness such as adopting an Ayurvedic diet and lifestyle, using Ayurvedic herbs and making adjustments to daily routines.

In the Ayurvedic view, the heart and mind are intimately connected. When that connection is weakened, imbalances arise. Interestingly, in Ayurveda the heart is considered the seat of consciousness. The ancient Ayurvedic text, the *Charaka Samhita* states "hridaye chetana sthanam". Translated it means "the seat of consciousness is in the heart". The Ayurvedic texts also describe the heart as "Hridaya" which is a Sanskrit word consisting of three parts: **Hr** means to receive, **Da** to give, and **Ya** to move. The essential qualities of the heart are contained within this Sanskrit name – receiving, giving and moving.

So, in essence, saying yes, being able to receive, give and let go with awareness helps to stimulate ojas.

### In Summary

Ayurveda teaches us that ojas and strong immunity are the natural outcomes of good health, which depends on robust agni, a healthy diet, a supportive lifestyle and a balanced nervous system. This being the case, supporting the immune system is often more about basic self-care than anything else. Our bodies flourish with proper nutrition and adequate sleep; they do even better when we commit to managing stress, cultivating healthy relationships, embracing joy and meaning, and living in alignment with our own authentic truth. Follow your own personal path to healing. Approach change one manageable step at a time and don't forget to celebrate your milestones along the way.

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