

Alzheimer's Disease

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Within Ayurveda, every aspect of life is governed by the interplay of the three *doshas* (body humors), *vata*, *pitta*, and *kapha*. Throughout the hours of the day and the seasons of the year, these doshas predominate in a rhythmic and cyclical manner. Similarly, throughout an individual's lifetime, each *dosha* has its time of predominance. *Kapha* governs childhood; *pitta*, maturity; and *vata*, old age. Thus, during the latter years of life, there is a tendency towards *vata* imbalances, such as memory loss, disorientation, paranoia, tremors, rigidity, cracked and quaking voice and stooped spine. The condition known to Western medicine as Alzheimer's disease constitutes, according to Ayurveda, a drastic and accelerated form of this *vata* provocation of old age.

In Alzheimer's disease, the *vata* is severely provoked in the *majja dhatu*, the tissue layer which includes the central nervous system and all other tissues which are contained within bone. The *vata* dries and thus degenerates the brain. In addition, the *vata* passes from the *majja dhatu* to the *mano vaha srotas*, or "mind-carrying channels," causing thought disorders such as paranoia and delusions as well as memory loss and confusion.

The causes of this severe *vata* provocation within *majja dhatu* and *mano vaha srotas* are both hereditary and acquired. Susceptible people are those who have a hereditary weakness of the *majja dhatu*. Once *vata* is provoked, it follows the line of least resistance, moving into the weakest tissue layer, in this case, the *majja dhatu*. Acquired causes are those which serve to aggravate the *vata dosha* sufficiently to bring about the onset of the disease in susceptible subjects. Unfortunately, our stressful, fast-paced, coffee-driven lifestyle provides abundant opportunities for such provocation. In addition, we are exposed to a number of environmental toxins which specifically weaken the *majja dhatu*, causing greatly increased susceptibility to Alzheimer's disease. Aluminum, pesticides, herbicides, agent orange, lead, and other toxins have a specific action in weakening the *majja dhatu agni*, the metabolic fire of the central nervous system.

One particularly important factor in the causation of Alzheimer's disease is the increased rate of change and increased population mobility. A person born before the first World War has witnessed changes more rapid than those experienced previously by many generations. Change provokes *vata*, as does movement. Relocation, movement of family members, and other such shifts present a much more *vata*-provoking situation than does the old village life, where people were born and died in the same house, surrounded by familiar family members.

Prevention, mitigation, and treatment of Alzheimer's disease requires that we create more stable, calming, *vata*-soothing lifestyles for ourselves and our elders. Regular routines, calm family mealtimes, daily rituals, and a slower pace of life will help to reduce the *vata*-provoking effects of our exponentially increasing rate of technological change. The old tribal or extended family systems must be replaced by stable and committed support networks. This is particularly important since, according to Ayurveda, a person with Alzheimer's disease is best nursed at home whenever possible. Relocation to the unfamiliar environment of a nursing home is drastically *vata*-provoking. However, homecare cannot realistically be provided by a single care giver, and is possible only when a solid and reliable support network is available.

From an Ayurvedic standpoint, it is recommended that health departments and health insurance companies focus on providing in-home services for patients with Alzheimer's disease, rather than nursing home care, since patients have a much greater chance of retaining a higher level of functioning when as little change as possible is made in their way of life.

Treatment

General and Specific

General *vata* pacifying measures should be introduced as soon as the onset of symptoms appears, or, better still, as soon as susceptibility is suspected. These include daily oil massage (or self massage) before taking a warm shower; taking a *vata*-soothing diet; and drinking, at bedtime, a cup of warm milk with a teaspoon of *ashwaganda* (*Withania somnifera*) and a half a teaspoon of *ghee* (clarified butter). If the cholesterol level is high, the *ghee* can be omitted, and skim milk can be used.

When older people live alone, they may consume an inadequate diet consisting of, for example, bread and coffee or frozen dinners. As much as possible, caffeine, frozen foods, and dry foods should be eliminated from the diet to prevent the development of *vata* provocation. In severe or advanced cases of Alzheimer's disease, a *khichari* diet could be given. This consists of Basmati rice, mung dal, well-cooked vegetables, and mild digestive spices such as cumin, coriander, fennel, turmeric, and ginger. At bedtime, the soles of the feet should be massaged with warm sesame oil.

In younger patients and in milder or earlier stages of the disease, cleansing practices may be indicated. These are *svedan* (sweating), *basti* (Ayurvedic enema), and *nasya* (nasal medication). Sweating is applied after oiling with sesame oil. A simple form of sweat that can be done at home consists of taking a bath at a comfortable temperature with one-third of a cup of dry ginger powder and one third cup baking soda in the tub. The ginger will promote sweating, so that after taking the tub, and remaining in a warm place, sweating should occur.

Recommended *basti* recipes are as follows:

1. Madhu tail basti

1½ pint pure water

1 oz. anise seeds

1 oz. *ashwaganda* (*Withania somnifera*)

1 oz. *brahmi* (*Bacopa monniera*)

Simmer, with lid on, for 20 minutes, then add:

2 oz honey

2 oz sesame oil

1 t salt

Strain and cool to slightly above blood heat and use as enema.

2. Vata-soothing basti (indicated in severe *vata* provocation; contraindicated in *pitta* provocation)

Equal parts:

Mustard seed decoction

Whey

Soured rice gruel

Cow's urine

Use as an enema.

In the case of unavailability of certain ingredients (e.g., organic cow's urine), mustard seed decoction alone may be used with good effect.

3. Oil basti

3-4 oz warm sesame oil, retained if possible for about half an hour.

Basti treatment should not be used with very old or very frail people, although a 2- oz oil *basti* may still be used if constipation is a significant issue.

Nasya Treatment

Indicated nasyas for Alzheimer's disease:

Brahmi (*Bacopa monniera*), *ghee nasya* — best if there is any *pitta* provocation

Vacha oil nasya (*Acorus calamus*) in sesame oil — best for severe *vata* provocation without any concurrent *pitta* provocation.

Nasya should not be used in very old, very frail or severely confused subjects, but only for those who are capable of understanding how to use the *nasya* correctly.

Specific treatment for Alzheimer's disease consists of the use of herbs which act upon the *majja dhatu* and mano vaha srotas. Chiefly, these are *brahmi*, *vacha*, *jatamansi* (*Nardostachys jatamansi*; ssp: *grandiflorum*), and *Akar karabha* (*Anacyclus pyrethrum*). Generally, the most useful remedy for Alzheimer's disease is *sarasvati churna*, which is highly effective in presenting and enhancing memory and intellect. *Sarasvati churna* can be taken in doses of one quarter to one-half teaspoon twice daily after meals. In severe cases, it can be taken three times daily. In cases where there is a bleeding disorder, ulcer, or bleeding hemorrhoids, *brahmi* and *jatamansi* may be used, but *vacha* should be omitted completely, since it is contraindicated in bleeding disorder.

Akar karabha, which contains the active ingredient anacycline, is extremely important in the treatment of Alzheimer's disease. Unfortunately, it is currently unavailable outside India.

It may be used as a medicated milk:

½ teaspoon *Akar karabha*

½ teaspoon *Brahmi*

1 cup milk

Boil together and drink at bedtime. It may also be used as a tea, using ½ teaspoon *Akar karabha* and ½ teaspoon *shankapushpi* (*Evolvulus alsinoides*). Steep 10 minutes in 1 cup boiling water and drink 2-3 times daily.

Despite the great usefulness of these general and specific measures in the treatment of Alzheimer's disease, regularity and stability remain the most important factors in treating this condition. Meals and remedies must be given at regular times, treatments such as oil massage must be administered according to a fixed schedule, whilst familiar faces and familiar surroundings are also of great importance. Any conditions that are haphazard, irregular or unexpected will serve only to provoke the *vata* still more. To be useful at all, Ayurvedic treatment of this condition must be both regular and prolonged.

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