

Ayurvedic Support for Heart Health

By Shannon Mooney

The heart has such an extraordinary function in the body. Its primary role as the pump of the cardiovascular system is to deliver oxygen and vital nutrition to the cells throughout the body and to help remove cellular waste. In Ayurveda, the heart not only has the outer, physical job of circulatory pump, but also has an inner core of feeling and knowing that is independent from the sensory mind. According to ancient Vedic texts the heart is the seat of consciousness, the root of prana, or the life force in the body. This understanding holds that the breath of life, prana, is regulated by inhalations and exhalations which are synchronized to the beating of the heart. As we know, our breathing patterns are often affected by our thoughts and emotions. The body's heart, mind and breath are all intimately linked.

Therefore, Ayurveda emphasizes the importance of not only physical strength and tone of the heart muscle, but also emotional balance and mental harmony. Charaka, one of the great ancient sages and physicians who first indoctrinated Ayurveda, explains the importance of stress relief to protect the heart in the following text:

"One who wishes to protect the heart, circulatory system and vital essence should avoid, above all else, those causes leading to mental stress and instability."

Ayurveda's holistic approach to health addresses the imbalances within the physical body, mind, and consciousness. By incorporating a few simple things into your daily life, such as a balanced diet, herbs, yoga, and meditation, you can support heart health and create harmony within the body.

A doshic imbalance within any of the three doshas can eventually cause problems within the heart. A vata-type imbalance may lead to tachycardia. A pitta-type imbalance may manifest as a burning sensation or heart attack, whereas a classic kapha-type imbalance is excessive salivation and heaviness of the heart. If a heart problem is suspected, a thorough examination by a physician is recommended. The Ayurvedic approach looks deeper than the symptoms in attempt to identify and remove the underlying cause of the disorder. The root cause is typically related to one or more of the following aspects: dietary, emotional, genetic patterns of weakness, exercise, work environment and relationship habits. The following recommendations can be used as supplemental support for general heart health.

Diet

Eating a diet that balances the doshas according to your individual prakruti is the most important initial approach to maintaining good health. Tune in to your digestive capability, or agni, and try choose foods that will serve as fuel to nourish your body. Choose a diet that is fresh, organic, and comprised mostly of fruits and vegetables to help support the body's physiological processes.

- Avoid over-eating. Ayurveda uses the measurement of one anjali, your two hands cupped together, as a guideline for the quantity of food you should ingest. Obesity has been shown to increase the risk of heart disease. Extra pounds can stress the heart to the point of exhaustion as it attempts to nourish the extra tissue.
- Limit or avoid caffeinated beverages, alcohol, and foods high in saturated fats such as red meats and cheeses.

- Be sure to eat mindfully, not in a stressful or rushed environment. It is not just what you eat that will determine good health in your body, but how you eat it. Eating freshly prepared meals and sitting down in a peaceful environment will help promote good digestion.
- Support healthy agni, the digestive fire, by sipping warm water or ginger tea throughout the day.

Lifestyle

Get plenty of sleep. This is the time your body uses for self-repair. People who are deficient in sleep may be at higher risk for high blood pressure, depression and other factors that can lead to heart disease.

Exercise is a vital component of stress management and overall health. With regular exercise, the body becomes stronger, is better able to cope with stress, and operates more efficiently. Exercise helps to increase the blood and oxygen supply to the heart. Engaging in moderate exercise regularly also helps to lower blood pressure. Brisk walking of 2-3 miles per day is an excellent exercise for everyone.

Herbs

- Ginger helps to decrease ama, increase agni and tonify the heart.
- Arjuna is used traditionally as a cooling tonic for heart conditions.
- Tulsi is known to aid digestion and maintain a healthy heart.

Yoga

A study by Yale University shows that practicing yoga and meditation three times per week help to lower the risk of heart disease. Many yoga asanas can help to open the heart, releasing tension in the chest cavity and pericardium, and increasing circulation. The simple relaxation of the skeletal muscles paired with conscious breathing can relieve stress in the body, promote lower blood pressure, help the body to resist arteriole deposits, and strengthen the heart.

Here are a few asanas to include in your practice: Side Angle (Parsvakonasana), Triangle (Trikonasana) and Child's pose, two of which can be demonstrated here. While practicing, be mindful of the position of the shoulders. Allow the shoulder blades to gently glide down your back and support the back of the heart.

Meditation

Meditation is an important tool in Ayurveda for quieting the mind and can also improve heart health. The physiological effects of mindful breathing and the quiet alert state of relaxation help to lower blood pressure and reduce other risk factors for heart disease. Stress can be a significant factor causing an increase in heart disease. Meditation is an effective stress management technique that triggers the relaxation response. The parasympathetic nervous system is activated which sends a message of calm to the mind and body to help dissolve stress. Relaxation helps to lower the heart rate and breathing rate, lower blood pressure and allow the body to send more blood to the organs for nourishment and repair. During relaxation the body also secretes more digestive juices, improving digestion. Simply sitting for meditation for 15-20 minutes once or twice a day can create these beneficial effects in your body.

Pranayama

Yogic breathing exercises or pranayama is an excellent way to revitalize prana within the body. Pranayama is a practice in controlling the breath. The breath is a bridge linking the body and mind. Pranayama cleanses and strengthens the physical body while calming and clearing the mind.

During deep abdominal breathing or full yogic breathing, inhalation happens in three stages. Firstly, the diaphragm moves downward into the abdomen, drawing air into the lowest part of the lungs. Then the intercostal muscles expand the rib cage moving air into the middle part of the lungs. Lastly, air comes into the upper part of the chest causing the clavicles to gently rise.

Try this practice preferably after yoga or exercise:

- Sit in a comfortable cross-legged position or in a chair.
- Keep the spine long and relaxed, with chin slightly tucked towards the chest.
- Place one hand on the abdomen and the other over the heart.
- Inhaling slowly, feel the belly expand first. Then, the rib cage. Finally, allow the breath to fill the upper chest, all the way up to the clavicles.
- Exhale slowly from the top down, gently pressing the naval towards the spine at the end of the exhalation to fully expel the breath from the lower lobes of the lungs.
- Continue steadily and rhythmically for 5 minutes.

There are many aspects to self-healing. Ayurveda recommends a balance of proper diet, lifestyle, herbs and meditation dependent on the nature and needs of the individual. It is important to remember that calming the mind and strengthening the heart go together and that the best approach to heart health is a combined one.