

Balancing Vata During the Fall Season

by Shannon Mooney

Along with the beautiful colors of changing leaves and delicious harvest vegetables of fall, come the shorter, colder, dry days of vata season. Vata dosha is naturally provoked through the increase of cold, dry, windy weather. Vata relates to wind, the principle of movement governed by the elements of ether and air. Just as the wind is subtle and changeable, the energy of vata dosha in the body is variable and strongly influenced by changes in the environment. One school of Ayurvedic thought believes that keeping vata dosha in check will reduce vitiation within the other two doshas and minimize the risk of disease. Balancing vata dosha with diet, lifestyle, herbs, meditation, and yoga creates a strong body-consciousness allowing a person to live in harmony through both daily and seasonal changes.

When vata dosha predominates, there is an increase in the dry, rough and cool qualities of our external and internal environments. In excess, dryness can begin to disturb various tissues and organs. Most noticeably, dry skin and lips are examples of excess vata. An internal drying can also be occurring particularly in the colon or large intestine, where vata is prone to first accumulate. Though we all notice the seasonal effects of autumn, people whose constitutions are vata-predominant and the elderly, who are in the vata stage of life, are most susceptible to this change.

Symptoms of vata-aggravation are:

- dry skin and lips
- constipation
- gas
- bloating
- little or low appetite
- hiccups
- anxiety
- fear
- scattered mind

Diet

Foods that are in season such as root vegetables and winter squash will help nourish and balance the body. Try carrots, beets, sweet potatoes, pumpkin, acorn, butternut, delicata and buttercup squashes. These have the qualities of sweet, heavy, smooth, dense and moist and are most balancing for vata. To help pacify vata dosha, favor the tastes of sweet, sour, salty in your diet, while limiting bitter and astringent tastes.

Some sweet grains to include this season are basmati rice, wheat berries, brown rice and sushi rice. Also, whole wheat pasta and or buckwheat udon noodles can be especially grounding for vata. Include ghee and other healthful oils such as almond, sesame or sunflower for internal oleation, kindling agni and increasing absorption.

When preparing food, use warming spices such as black pepper, dry ginger, cinnamon and asafoetida to help to stoke the digestive fire. Casseroles, soups and stews are easily digested and can

be very nourishing for vata, warming the body from the inside out.

Other important dietary guidelines for balancing the body:

- Eat at routine times each day, having lunch be the largest meal.
- Take time to lovingly prepare and enjoy nutritious meals.
- Avoid ice cold drinks, particularly taken with meals or immediately after.
- Limit raw, cold foods such as salads and raw vegetables.
- Minimize caffeinated beverages and other stimulants. These increase vata, aggravating the nervous system.
- Include warm milk spiced with a pinch of ginger, cinnamon, cardamom and nutmeg. This is a nutritious way to soothe the nerves and, when taken before bed, will promote sound sleep.

Signs & Symptoms of Increased Vata

You may be experiencing some of the following signs or symptoms:

- *nervousness, anxiety, panic, fear*
- *twitches, tics, tremors, spasms*
- *dry or chapped skin*
- *constipation, gas, bloating, dry, hard stools*
- *low body weight*
- *dislike of cold and wind*
- *difficulty tolerating loud noises*
- *light, interrupted sleep*
- *spacey, scattered feeling*
- *excess thinking or worrying*

To decrease vata, Ayurveda has given us dietary, lifestyle and herbal treatment strategies. Here are a few underlying concepts that these strategies are based on:

- *Routine*
- *Warmth*
- *Serenity*
- *Nourishment*

Vata-Reducing Diet

General Guidelines

Enjoy:

- Foods that are naturally sweet, sour and salty in taste.
- Warm foods, both energetically and in temperature. Whole, freshly cooked foods.
- A limited selection of legumes, including mung dahl, tofu or tempeh that is well-cooked and warm soy milk spiced with cinnamon and nutmeg.

- Warming spices like ginger, black pepper, cinnamon and cumin, but not extremely hot spices like cayenne pepper.
- Plenty of room temperature or warm drinks.
- Dairy, as long as it is not very cold. Avoid drinking milk with your meals. It is best to have it warm and spiced with cinnamon and nutmeg, at least an hour before or after other food.
- A generous amount of high-quality oils or ghee in your daily diet.
- Routine times for your meals.
- Taking a deep breath after swallowing your last bite and heading off for your next activity.
- Eating your meal in a peaceful environment.

Avoid

- Foods that are bitter, astringent and pungent.
- Foods that are cooling, both energetically and in temperature.
- Dry and light foods (e.g. popcorn and crackers).
- Too much raw food, especially in the mornings and evenings (salads, carrot sticks, raw fruit, fresh fruit and vegetable juices, etc.)
- Most beans, including cold soy products.
- Highly processed foods (like canned or frozen foods, "TV" dinners or pastries).
- Cold or carbonated drinks.
- Caffeine, nicotine and other stimulants.
- Overeating or eating very heavy meals.
- Eating fresh fruit or drinking fruit juice within 1/2 hr of any other food.
- Foods or drinks that contain refined sugar or corn syrup.
- Deep fried foods
- Hard alcohol.

Broad spectrum vata pacifying herbs include Triphala, Ashwagandha and Chyavanprash for Vata and Kapha. These herbs can all be taken daily as part of a vata pacifying regimen.

- A regular, daily routine with regular times for eating, sleeping, working, etc.
- A daily 10-20 min. self-massage with ½ c warm sesame oil.
- A gentle exercise routine that includes a calm, stretch-focused form of yoga, Tai qi (tai chi), qi gong (chi gong), walking, swimming (but don't get chilled) about five times per week.
- Keeping warm, no matter what the weather.
- Sweet, soothing music, smells, scenes and company.
- Vata-reducing oils.
- Vata-reducing herbs and remedies.

Lifestyle

Daily activities have a profound effect on our health. A routine, practiced daily, is stronger medicine than an occasional remedy. Consistency is of particular importance as we enter into vata season. When the cool, fall weather arrives and the holiday season is upon us, it can sometimes be difficult to maintain a peaceful, grounded state of being. Having a routine to follow restores balance throughout the day, everyday, safeguarding against the anxiety and stress associated with increased vata.

According to Ayurveda, abhyanga or oil massage is an essential component to a daily routine. This practice nourishes and strengthens the body, encourages regular sleep patterns, stimulates internal organs, enhances blood circulation and can significantly reduce vata. Try Vata Massage Oil or Organic Sesame Oil for balancing vata dosha.

Additional lifestyle tips for balancing vata:

- Stay warm and avoid drafts.
- Avoid excessive exercise or physical movement.
- Eliminate sources of emotional stress.
- Get enough restful sleep each night. Most people require 6-8 hours.

Herbs

According to Ayurvedic medicine, Ashwagandha may be the single most important herb to balance vata in the body. Ashwagandha is a powerful adaptogenic tonic that supports the body's ability to adapt to stress, promotes a healthy immune response and maintains homeostasis, making it the perfect herb for maintaining optimal health and vitality this fall. Ashwagandha is an important rasayana or rejuvenative tonic. Traditionally in Ayurveda, it nourishes and strengthens. It is anabolic in nature and nourishing to the musculoskeletal system, supporting quality and tone of the tissues. It helps produce ojas, the vital essence that nourishes reproductive health and governs immune function.

Ayurveda considers Haritaki to be one of the best herbs for balancing vata-type digestion. Supporting healthy elimination and detoxification, it removes undigested food and accumulated natural toxins from the gastrointestinal tract. It strengthens and nourishes the tissues and supports proper function of the colon, lungs, liver and spleen.

Yoga

Pawanmuktasana, the wind relieving or knees-to-chest pose helps to expel air collected in the colon, aid constipation, relieve tension in the lower back, tone the spine and massage the stomach and intestines.

- Lie on the back with bent knees and feet hip width apart on the floor.
- Allow the chin to be slightly tucked to maintain length in the spine and back of the neck.
- Raise knees and draw them in towards the chest.
- Wrap arms around shins, interlacing hands or crossing forearms.
- Breathe deep into the abdomen, noticing the belly fill and gently press against the tops of the thighs on the inhalation. On exhalation, the belly sinks back towards the spine and the knees effortlessly draw in closer.

Meditation

An imbalance of vata can manifest as a mind full of fear and anxiety. Creating a spiritual practice using meditation and pranayama can help to calm these emotions and create a sense of peace and well-being. Invite calm and relaxation into the body for a few minutes each day. Be still. Direct your attention inward. Notice your breath. Allow this practice to act as a protective shield to the destabilizing influences of the external environment.

Pranayama

When we are feeling swept up in the fast pace of life, slowing down and taking a few deep belly breaths will do wonders to help relax the nervous system, calm vata dosha, and balance prana in the body. Allow the belly to fill like a balloon upon inhalation and then allow the belly to naturally sink in towards the spine with the exhalation.

How you care for yourself during the autumn will determine your body's ability to maintain health through the winter. Ground yourself by supporting sensitive vata dosha with Ayurveda's ancient wisdom. Now is time to keep warm, nourish yourself and protect your vitality in preparation for the months ahead.