

Staying Healthy Through the Holidays

by Shannon Mooney

With winter settling in and the holiday season approaching, it is more important than ever to safeguard our health from the many varieties of cold and flu that seem to abound this time of year. The earth and water begin to freeze as snow falls. The air is cold and dry. As the body mirrors the changes in the outside environment, we typically notice imbalances of kapha and vata doshas. By balancing the qualities of these doshas, we can keep immunity high and the body in a state of health. Ayurveda's age old wisdom offers preventative measures regarding diet, lifestyle practices, herbs, and yoga and meditation, to help keep us healthy throughout the season.

Immunity is influenced by the power of agni, digestive fire, and our ability to digest, assimilate and absorb nutrients in our bodies. Within a healthy body where immune function is strong, any invaders are neutralized or destroyed then expelled and the body returns to normal. If the body is unhealthy or has ama, stored toxins from undigested food, then an environment is created in which invaders are encouraged to thrive, making the body more susceptible to illness. Ama can be created from both physical and mental indigestion.

Diet

Although indulgence in rich food and drink is customary this time of year, remember to respect yourself and question your body's capability to digest all that you take in. Though it requires attention, make it a point to eat mindfully when attending social gatherings and family meals. Staying conscious to choose healthful foods and not overeat will help to prevent indigestion and ama formation.

Digestive fire is weakest in the winter months. Ayurveda recommends eating light, warm, and nourishing foods. One-pot meals such as kitcheri, a soupy stew of equal parts basmati rice and mung dhal, and power-packed vegetable soups can be ideal foods that are easy to digest.

- Kapha is aggravated by foods that are heavy, oily, and cold such as cheese, yogurt, and other dairy. If you are prone to congestion, it may be best to limit or eliminate these foods in your diet.
- Include warm spices such as ginger, black pepper, and turmeric to increase digestive fire.
- Include many fresh organic fruits and vegetables in your diet. These provide you with nutrients, antioxidants and fiber necessary for immune function.
- Avoid cold, dry, or raw foods.
- Moderation is key. Be conscious of quantity.
- Only eat when you are truly hungry.

A digestive tea following a meal can improve digestion and help to soothe the entire gastrointestinal tract. The ritual of making and drinking tea can provide a relaxing time, giving yourself a chance to show some devotion to agni, digestive fire. Here is a simple recipe from Amadea Morningstar's *The Ayurvedic Cookbook*.

Digestive Tea

- 2 cups water
- 1 teaspoon coriander seeds
- 1 teaspoon fennel seeds
- 1 teaspoon cumin seeds

Bring water to a boil. Put all the seeds in a blender. Pour in boiling water. Grind the seeds with the water. Strain. Drink after any meal.

Lifestyle

Our lives can be so hectic around the holiday season with traveling to visit friends and family or hosting guests in our own homes. By being flexible, practicing acceptance and adapting to our ever-changing environment you can enhance immune function. The Sanskrit word for immunity is vyadhikshamatva translating as 'forgiveness of disease'. Resistance to change and clinging to challenges will only impede health. This type of flexibility is about becoming more whole and saying 'yes' to life. It is about positively accepting all that comes your way, even the pain and suffering, allowing yourself to be with it. Although this is more of a mental and spiritual process, it is important to remember in the face of adversity, that when something does not go your way, acceptance can positively affect your health.

Other Ayurvedic practices that can help you stay balanced this season:

- Keep a daily routine, waking and sleeping, and taking meals at regular times.
- Being sure to get sufficient sleep. This is the body's time for regeneration.
- Keep warm.

In case of kapha congestion:

- Take a steam shower or use a bowl with hot water, place a towel over your head and inhale the steam.
- Use a neti pot to cleanse the nasal passages and help clear excess mucus.
- Nasya oil can be used to help lubricate nasal passages and clear sinuses.

Yoga

Yoga and meditation offer healing benefits in all aspects of the body and mind. One of the best ways to slow down and rejuvenate is to practice restorative postures, such as Viparita Karani, or legs-up-the-wall. In this pose, you are grounding, gently stabilizing your pelvis, the seat of vata, while nourishing the nervous system through deep abdominal breathing. If feeling overextended or overwhelmed, another calming, quieting posture is Child's pose. This asana draws the energy inward, helping to restore and nourish our inner core.

Kapha types and others feeling the heaviness of the season should practice yoga more rigorously. Their goal should be to warm and energize the body. Sun Salutations or any flow type sequence to raise the heart rate is most effective. Raising the arms overhead in Palm asana brings energy up, helping to clear congestion in the upper body.

Meditation

Especially during the holiday season, many of us find it challenging to support our own needs for relaxation and rejuvenation. Meditating each day for 5 minutes in the morning can help to reduce stress and quiet the mind. During meditation, bring awareness to the breath. The breath is the bridge between the body and the mind. One-pointed focus of the mind helps to cleanse the mind of mental ama. Just as we physically cleanse the body each day, we should cleanse the mind of any thought that distracts from the present moment. When the mind is clear, the body can reach a state of profound relaxation. The mind sends a message to the body to 'let go' and surrender to cosmic consciousness. When beginning meditation, remember that it is a process. It is the nature of the mind to be active, so do not become discouraged when thoughts persistently pop in. Simply be with them, allow them to pass, and begin again. This practice may allow you to get in touch with your true self.

The knowledge of Ayurveda enables us to make conscious, wholesome decisions to support immunity, stay healthy, and to cultivate a true sense of peace and joy this holiday season.