



AYURVEDIC DIETETICS ON MENTAL HEALTH

– A COMPREHENSIVE REVIEW

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Abstract

Ahara, the most essential requirement of all living beings is looked upon by Ayurveda with great relevance in the causation as well as treatment of diseases. Ahara can effectively be used as medicine as nowadays, it become an integral part in the process of treatment. There is a relationship between body and mind. The Ahara influences body and mind by its correct method of food intake. Health is defined in the aspect of physical, mental and spiritual aspect where the mental health influences the body, thus producing abnormalities. Ahara as a part of lifestyle modification was reviewed and studied with reference to all the classical literatures of Ayurveda with its impact on mental health. Improper dietetic methods and disturbed agni hampers the digestive process, mediated by the emotional distressors also, thereby significantly contributing to the physical and mental abnormalities. Dietetic modulation influences the gut microbiota through Gut Brain Axis stimulate the emotional and behavioural disturbances. Manasika factors like Rajas and tamas were modulated with the diet and lifestyle. So, the intake of wholesome and unwholesome food practices can lead to the health and disease respectively.

Keywords:

Ahara, mental health, dietetics, gut microbiota

I. INTRODUCTION

Ahara is the basic factor for the sustenance of life. All living things in the universe thrive on food, which is responsible for the growth and development of the body¹. Ahara is considered as Brahma and man is considered as the essence of food in Upanishads². Ahara is the cause of strength, complexion and vitality of all living beings³. Owing to its importance, ahara has been placed first while describing the three supporting pillars of life namely ahara, nidra and brahmacharya⁴. No medicine is equivalent to ahara and so, it is considered as Mahabhaishajyam. Health as well as disease is dependant on proper and improper method of diet intake⁵. Ayurveda defines health in the aspect of spiritual level as “Prasanna aatmendriya manaha”⁶ which satisfies the WHO definition of Health as a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease. Mental health is a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and is able to make a contribution to his or her community.

Review of Ahara

Anna has been regarded as ‘Brahma’, as all animates are produced from anna, after production life is maintained by anna at the end, assimilate in the anna⁷. It says Aushadhibhyah annam” – food is considered as a medicine by its correct method of food intake. Chandogya Upanishad says the purity of food leads to purity of mind in getting stable memory freeing from all the mental conflicts⁸. Upanishad also points out that the anna we eat has three parts. The grossest part is refusal matter, the middling part is flesh and the subtlest is mind. Thus the nature of food we eat manifests as nature of our mind. Manusmriti said to follow certain psychic discipline along with food. It is advocated to praise the food but not to abuse and after seeing the food, everyone gets delighted.

Manusmriti further explores the effect of regard and disregard towards food stating that taking the food with devotion and eager gives strength and energy but dislike or aversion towards food destroys both⁹. According to Bhagavat Gita, the body and life in it are based on food and sustained by food. Diet has been accepted as a source for the creation of life. Bhagavat Gita considers “Yuktaahara” means balanced diet. Further to achieve success in yogic practices, it is emphasized to give importance of mitahara (appropriate and wholesome) diet along with other activities and regimen of life. Diet is classified into three groups for people with three different qualities. Foods which are sweet, unctuous, substantial and agreeable are liked by Sattvika, foods which are bitter, sour, saline or hot, pungent, unctuous and burning are liked by Rajasika, this kind of food produces pain, grief and diseases. The food which is tasteless, stinking, cooked overnight and impure are liked by Tamasika¹⁰.

Mind and Body

Manas is an integral part of life of an individual. Manas and body are so much inter related to each other that they cannot be separated. For example sweets which increase Kapha Dosha in the body also increase lethargy and sleepiness which are actually the Manasika factors. Thus, the mental and physical factors regularly affect each other. Examination of mental faculty has got a prime importance while examining any patient. Individuals having excellent mental faculties are characterized by good memory, devotion, skill, courage, fighting in battles with prowess, free from anxiety having well directed and serious intellect and activities and engaged in various activities. It is one's own mind, sattva has been used for the Manas depending upon its strength, which is of three types - superior, medium and inferior.

The mind has three qualities namely satwa, raja and tama. Satwa is the highest guna, representing balance and harmony. It is the ideal state. Raja represents an active and intense mind. Excess raja leads to stress, overstimulation, and over-excitement. Tama is the base guna associated with inertia, lethargy, and laziness¹¹.

Dietetics in Ayurveda

Intake of wholesome and unwholesome food is responsible for the maintenance of health and production of diseases respectively¹². Proper food intake maintains the digestive process, balances the doshas, nourishes the dhatus and helps in the formation of malas. Ayurveda emphasizes the importance of proper nutrition through food intake by appropriate food choices for regular consumption, food combination and cooking methods taken in right quantity which gets digested as well as metabolized in time. Health is maintained by the intake of proper ahara which leads to happiness, observance of truth and celibacy and ultimately to salivation¹³. Hence food is the basic factor for the attainment of all of them.

Aharavidhividhanam is the rule for method of diet intake for healthy individuals as well as to unhealthy ones by considering the wholesome diet¹⁴. It includes the diet and dietary guidelines which are equally significant. These rules are specified for how to eat and when to eat. This is a swasthya aspect. Also there are many diseases in which Aharavidhividhanam is mentioned as Hetu. So the advice of pathyasevana and nidana parivarjana in the form of aharavidhi Vidhana can also help for vikara prashamana

Acharya Charaka has given ahara vidhi vidhanam (dietary guidelines), which can prevent many diseases arising from faulty dietary habits. • Ushnam ashniyat (consuming warm food) • Snigdham ashniyat (food should be unctuous) • Matravat ashniyat (food in proper quantity) According to Ayurveda, matra (amount) is of two types one is sarvagraha (whole amount) another parigrah (amount of individual ingredient) • Jeerne ashniyat (Meal taken after digestion of previous meal) • Veeryaaviruddham ashniyat (food having no contradictory potencies) • Ishtadeshe ishtasarvopkarnam cha ashniyat (Meal taken at proper place and with appropriate accessories) • Naatidrutam ashniyat (Not eating too fast or not in a hurry) • Naativilambitam ashniyat (Not eating too slowly) • Ajalpan, Ahasan tanmana bhunjeetam asniyat (Eating without talking or laughing, Mindful eating, with concentration) • Atmanamabhisamikshyam ashniyat (Eating after analyzing one's need)¹⁴

Dietetic habits influencing the mental health

Food should be taken in a clean hygienic place with appropriate accessories. Even most wholesome food taken in appropriate quantity does not get digested properly due to worry, grief, fear, anger etc. These factors influence the mind as well as hygiene of the place¹⁵. So it's obvious that for healthy food, healthy surrounding is required. Specific guidelines regarding the place of food preparation, the place for eating and the place where food should be kept before serving is noted. The place of eating should be neat and even and crowded places should be avoided to avoid mental distractions and spread of micro-organisms through contact. It should be in a secluded area free from troubles.

Food should not be taken too hurriedly nor too leisurely. Eating food too hurriedly makes food to enter into the wrong passage, does not move from there and gets located at improper place (does not enter stomach). Consuming food very fast does not able to perceive the taste of food and cannot able to detect the foreign bodies mixed with them¹⁶. By eating this way, neither the good nor the bad qualities of food are known. Eating food very slowly tends to eat more food than usual and does not produce satiety. The temperature of food may get cold. All these factors hamper agni and the food is not digested properly. These two methods of diet intake is detrimental to health. Research on eating speed shows that eating quickly leads to poor digestion, increased weight gain and lower satisfaction. However slow eating shows better digestion, better hydration, easier weight loss or maintenance and greater satisfaction. Mindful eating is suggested with complete concentration on meals.

Food should be eaten without much talking and laughing. Food should be eaten with full concentration towards it as well as the eating process. Talking and laughing divert the attention from the meals and food is eaten too hastily or too slowly¹⁷. Talking or laughing during meals or not giving due attention causes the same symptoms as that of food eaten too hurriedly or leisurely¹⁸. The mental distractions showed overeating leading to obesity. While paying attention to a meal was linked to eating sufficient meal and lesser chances of gaining weight. Food intake was significantly enhanced with the presence of familial friends and with watching tv because both of these will draw attention away from the consumed food and can increase the food intake. Thus, paying attention to meal is directly linked to satiety and weight gain. Mindful eating includes noticing the colors, smells, flavors and textures of food.

There is relationship between body and mind. Proper method of food intake not only nourishes the body, but also mind and sense organs. ‘ Priyam annam’ is that food which is nourishing for every sense organs and mind. The food and shareera have the same constitution of panchamahabhutas. The indriyas are also derived from these basic factors. Hence food nourishes the body, mind and sense organs. It is not only the excessive quantity of food, even most wholesome food taken in appropriate quantity does not get digested due to anxiety, worry, grief, fear, anger etc and unwholesome food should not be taken with greed or ignorance. These psychological emotions can harm the digestion process leading to the formation of ama(undigested food) and a number of metabolic disorders¹⁹. If the concentration of mind during meals is such important for healthy people, it becomes more obligatory for the diseased ones. Hence the dietetic rules are important among “pathya” for every disease.

Atmanam means self and Abhisameekshya means properly assessed. There is uniqueness among each individual. The rules of ahara are told in general and they are definitely wholesome. But they should be only applied after consideration of ownself, that is after considering one’s own constitution and capacity²⁰.

The involvement of bodily and mental factors are also crucial for the digestion, absorption and assimilation process in the GI tract. Where to consume food, that is in ishta desha using ishta sarvopakarana and benefits and complications on not following them are given, including the concerns about the factors of mind and the cleanliness of the food served. And lastly, how to consume food is not too fast nor too slow, without talking and laughing and with proper consideration of self.

Thus, complying to the dietetic rules help to prevent the pathogenesis of many diseases as its etiology includes ahara which are unwholesome and rules deviating. Ahara vidhi is essential in treatment while considering the pathya ahara. In the nidana parivarjana aspect of chikitsa, by following the rules of diet intake it is possible for the pacification of diseases.

II. DISCUSSION

Ahara mentioned one among Trayopastambhas (The three supporting pillars) along with sleep and celibacy shows the importance given for the lifestyle modification thosdays. Evolution of manas from subtle part of food described in Chandogya Upanishad, which indicates that there is definite effect of quality of food on manas. There is relationship between body and mind. Proper method of food intake not only nourishes the body, but also mind and sense organs. The food and shareera have the same constitution of panchamahabhutas. The indriyas are also derived from these basic factors. Hence food nourishes the body, mind and sense organs. It is not only the excessive quantity of food, even most wholesome food taken in appropriate quantity does not get digested due to anxiety, worry, grief, fear, anger etc and unwholesome food should not be taken with greed or ignorance. These psychological emotions can harm the digestion process leading to the formation of ama(undigested food) and a number of metabolic disorders²¹. If the concentration of mind during meals is such important for healthy people, it becomes more obligatory for the diseased ones. The mental distractions showed overeating leading to obesity. While paying attention to a meal was linked to eating sufficient meal and lesser chances of gaining weight. The involvement of bodily and mental factors are also crucial for the digestion, absorption and assimilation process

in the GI tract. Where to consume food, that is in ishta desha using ishta sarvopakarana and benefits and complications on not following them are given, including the concerns about the factors of mind and the cleanliness of the food served. With respect to the rules of food intake, what, when, where and how to follow these rules should be taken into consideration. So, what kind of food should be taken is explained in the foremost part. Ushnam, snigdam and virya aviruddha type of food is related with quality and matravat with the quantity of food to be taken. The next part of the rules deal with when to take food, suggesting to take food after the proper digestion of a previous meal. The food consumed after the complete digestion of a previous meal helps in the easy digestion of a meal already consumed and the meal to be consumed. Otherwise, it may hinder the digestive process leading to metabolic disorders and so on. Diet and dietetic methods told in Ayurveda are a part of the lifestyle modification to be adopted during these times. A diet consisting of fast food and highly processed foods is associated with increased intestinal barrier permeability ^(22,23). The antioxidant system, which has been implicated in the development of psychiatric disorders, is relevant here and its proper functioning depends on the presence of nutrients in food. In addition, the concentration of brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), which is involved in plasticity and neurodegenerative processes, depends on nutrients ⁽²⁴⁾. Findings indicate a reduction in the incidence of depression and suicide with a healthy eating pattern ^{25,26}. The high fat/high sugar western style diet is associated with cognitive impairments, particularly memory impairments (and increased anxiety-like behavior^{27,28} . Randomized trials are emerging that evaluate the efficacy of dietary change as a form of treatment for depression . Selective food supplementation can be beneficial in the treatment of psychiatric disorders. Gut brain axis and the influence of gut microbiota on the brain function, thereby connecting the mind connection need to be studied further.

III. CONCLUSION

Dietary consideration in terms of wholesome and unwholesome food is an important component of Ayurvedic therapeutics, which eventually leads to happiness or misery. The combination of balanced/well functioning soul, senses and mind contribute to the physical and mental health. Manas links the body, soul and sense organs. Diet and its dietary choices significantly influence the mental health through the emotional distressors, indulging in improper and unbalanced food practices. The interconnection of Ahara, Agni and Ojas has been expounded, by emphasizing the impact of dietary patterns which subsequently affect the mental well-being. This holistic approach highlighted the significant link between physical and mental health, focussing on effective treatment and overall wellbeing.

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