

Ahara as Mahabhesajya An Ayurvedic Review of Its Role in Health and Disease

Akanksha OP. Dubey*¹, Satish P. Masavkar², Hemant S. Paradkar³

1. Post Graduate Scholar 3rd year,
2. Hon. Consultant & Physician,
3. Associate Professor,

Department of *Kayachikitsa*, APM, Ayurved Mahavidyalaya, Sion, Mumbai.

*Corresponding Author: Email id: akanshadubey93@gmail.com

Abstract

Āhāra (food) is considered the most fundamental requirement for the sustenance of life. Ayurveda regards food not merely as nourishment but as *Mahābheṣajya*—the greatest medicine¹². The human body, its strength, vitality, and even disease manifestation are deeply rooted in dietary habits. Classical Ayurvedic texts emphasise that health and disease originate from food¹, making it a central pillar in both preventive and curative medicine. This review explores the concept of *Āhāra* in Ayurveda, its role as one of the *Tri-Upastambha*¹⁴, its physiological and psychological significance, and dietary principles such as temperature, unctuousness, and moderation for maintaining health.

Keywords: *Āhāra*, *Mahābheṣajya*, *Tri-Upastambha*, *JatharAgni*, Dietetics, Ayurveda

Introduction

Food is the primary and universal requirement of all living beings. Every

organism in the universe is naturally inclined towards food, as it sustains life and supports growth, strength, vitality, and happiness. Ayurveda recognises that not only the formation of the human body, but also the origin of diseases, is directly related to food intake¹. Thus, food occupies a central position in Ayurvedic thought, influencing: Physical strength and energy, Complexion and voice, Longevity and vitality, Mental happiness and enthusiasm, Digestive and metabolic balance¹²

1. Concept of *Āhāra* as *Mahābheṣajya*

Ayurveda describes food as *Mahābheṣajya*—the supreme medicine¹. Substances that nourish and sustain the *Dhātus* (body tissues) are termed *Āhāra*. Unlike medicines, food is consumed daily and continuously influences health. The importance of *Āhāra* is further emphasised by its inclusion among the *Tri-Upastambha*¹⁴ (three supporting pillars of life):

- *Āhāra* (Food)
- *Nidrā* (Sleep)
- *Brahmacarya* (Self-control)

Among these, *Āhāra* holds special importance, as both health (*Swasthya*) and disease (*Vyādhi*) depend predominantly on dietary quality and habits¹.

2. Classical References on the Importance of Food

According to *Āchārya Suśruta*, food is responsible for: Generation of consciousness, Development of physical strength, Nourishment and transportation of *Dhātus*, Maintenance of longevity (*Āyu*), Vitality (*Ojas*), Enthusiasm and energy, Preservation of digestive fire (*Agni*).

Similarly, the *Bhagavad Gītā* states that food influences the mind (*Manas*) and intellect (*Buddhi*), highlighting the psychophysiological impact of diet. Thus, food must be selected in such a way that it maintains present health, prevents future diseases, supports physical, mental, and metabolic harmony.

3. Relationship Between Food, Health, and Disease

Ayurveda clearly states that: The human body is formed from food, improper food habits lead to disease¹.

Wholesome food taken in the right quantity and manner nourishes tissues and strengthens *Agni*, whereas unwholesome food disturbs *Doṣas*, impairs digestion, and leads to pathology¹². Hence, dietary regulation forms the foundation of both preventive medicine and therapeutics.

4. Dietary Principles for Healthy Living

Ayurveda prescribes specific qualities of food to maintain digestive balance and overall health.

4.1 Warm Food (*Uṣṇa Āhāra*)

Warm food is recommended because: It enhances taste, stimulates *JatharAgni*, facilitates quick digestion, alleviates *Vāta* *Doṣa*, warm food supports proper digestion and metabolism, preventing the accumulation of undigested material (*Āma*)¹.

4.2 Unctuous Food (*Snigdha Āhāra*)

Unctuous (oily) food is advised as it: Improves palatability, maintains balanced digestive fire, promotes smooth movement of *Vāta*, enhances nourishment, strength, and complexion¹³, proper intake of unctuous food contributes to tissue nourishment and vitality.

4.3 Adequate Food Intake (*Mātrāpūrvaka Āhāra*)

Consuming food in an appropriate quantity maintains the balance of the three *Doṣas*—*Vāta*, *Pitta*, and *Kapha*. It enhances physical strength and preserves overall health. Food taken in proper measure is digested smoothly, produces no complications, and facilitates proper elimination of bodily wastes¹.

4.4 Eating Only After Complete Digestion of Previous Meal (*Jīrṇa Āhāra Sevanā*)

Food should be consumed only after the previously eaten meal has been completely digested. This practice prevents disorders such as indigestion and strengthens the digestive fire (*JatharAgni*). Eating at the proper time promotes healthy appetite and ensures proper formation of the seven body tissues—*Rasa*, *Rakta*, *Māmsa*, *Meda*, *Asthi*, *Majjā*, and *Śukra*—thereby enhancing longevity, strength, and complexion¹⁴.

4.5 Avoidance of Foods with Opposite Potency (*Vīrya-Viruddha Āhāra*)

Foods possessing contradictory potencies (*Śīta*—cold and *Uṣṇa*—hot) should not be consumed together. Such incompatible combinations disturb physiological balance

and may lead to disorders, particularly skin diseases (*Kuṣṭha*)¹². For example, milk is cold in potency (*Śīta-vīrya*), whereas meat is hot in potency (*Uṣṇa-vīrya*); their combined consumption produces harmful effects due to opposing properties.

4.6 Consumption of Freshly Prepared Food (*Navīna, Sukha-pāka Āhāra*)

Freshly cooked, soft, and warm food is easily digestible and promotes efficient absorption of nutrients. Such food supports digestive strength and does not contribute to disease formation¹.

4.7 Avoidance of Overeating (*Ati-Āhāra*)

Excessive consumption of food overloads the digestive system, leading to improper digestion and assimilation. Overeating may cause discomfort, fatigue, and, in severe cases, regurgitation or choking¹. Therefore, food should always be consumed in a quantity suitable for one's digestive capacity.

4.8 Avoidance of Delayed, Stale, or Spoiled Food (*Ati-vilambita Āhāra*)

Food that is stale, spoiled, or kept for long durations becomes contaminated and loses its digestive efficacy. Although such food may not cause immediate illness, its cold and degraded nature weakens digestion and contributes to long-term health disturbances¹.

4.9 Mindful and Attentive Eating (*Manalāvīna Āhāra Sevanā*)

Food should be consumed with full attention and enjoyment, without excessive talking, laughing, or distraction. Mindful eating promotes efficient digestion and prevents *Doṣa* aggravation¹. Habitual eating while watching television, using mobile phones, or engaging in other distractions is commonly associated with digestive and metabolic disorders.

4.10 Dietary Selection According to Strength, Constitution, and Tissue Requirement

Food should be consumed in accordance with an individual's physical strength (*Bala*) and constitutional nature (*Prakṛti*). Selection of food substances must be done after carefully assessing which body tissues (*Dhātus*) or organs are deficient and require nourishment. Food should be taken in such a manner that it adequately supports both physical health and mental well-being, ensuring optimal nourishment of the body and mind¹⁴.

5. Sequence of Tastes (*Rasa Krama*) in Food

The sequence of tastes (*Rasa*) in a meal should ideally follow the order:

Sweet (*Madhura*) → Sour (*Amla*) → Salty (*Lavaṇa*) → Pungent (*Kaṭu*) → Bitter (*Tikta*) → Astringent (*Kaṣāya*).

Sweet-tasting substances are consumed first, followed successively by sour, salty, pungent, bitter, and astringent tastes. Although the occasional absence of one or more tastes does not invalidate a meal, Ayurveda recommends that all six tastes (*Ṣaḍ-rasa*) be included regularly in the daily diet. Balanced intake of all tastes promotes strength, tissue nourishment, and metabolic harmony¹, whereas a mono-rasa (single-taste) diet leads to weakness and nutritional imbalance. Hence, a well-balanced six-taste meal is considered ideal.

6. Quantity of Food (*Āhāra Mātrā*)

The quantity of food should be such that it can be digested comfortably within an appropriate time without causing disease or discomfort. When food is consumed in proper quantity and digested efficiently, the body receives optimal nourishment.

Consumption of insufficient food reduces physical endurance, leads to loss of strength and body weight, and predisposes to *Vāta*-

dominant disorders. Conversely, excessive food intake aggravates all three *Doṣas*—*Vāta*, *Pitta*, and *Kapha*—resulting in disease development, premature ageing, and reduced lifespan¹.

Therefore, food must always be consumed in an appropriate quantity. The ideal quantity of food varies depending on factors such as age, digestive fire (*Agni*), occupation, physical exertion, and the nature of food consumed. Heavy (*Guru*) foods, such as cereals and solid meals, should occupy approximately one-third of the stomach capacity, while light (*Laghu*) foods, such as soups and liquids, may fill up to half of the stomach.

7. Ideal Proportion of Food Intake

According to Ayurvedic principles, the stomach should be conceptually divided into four parts: One part filled with solid food (*Anna*), Second part filled with liquid (*Drava*) And remaining two parts should be left empty to facilitate the movement of *Vāta* proper digestion¹. Consumption in this proportion ensures smooth digestion, prevents gastric pressure, and avoids discomfort in the chest or cardiac region. It allows the heart and lungs to function freely without strain.

Physiological Benefits of Proper Food Intake:

When food is taken in appropriate quality, quantity, and proportion, All sense organs function optimally. Natural hunger and thirst are maintained, One experiences lightness, energy, and enthusiasm, Normal breathing, movement, sitting, standing, laughter, and work capacity are preserved. Such dietary discipline promotes health, longevity, and functional efficiency of the body.

8. Types of Diet According to *Āchārya Suśruta*

Āchārya Suśruta has described twelve types of dietetic regimens based on the qualities (*guṇa*), potency (*vīrya*), and therapeutic requirements of the body³. These dietary types are prescribed according to disease condition, doṣic predominance, strength of the individual, and environmental factors. The following are important diet types relevant to clinical practice:

8.1 Cold Diet (*Śīta Āhāra*)

A cold diet is recommended for individuals suffering from excessive thirst, burning sensation, fever, poisoning, traumatic injury, or conditions associated with excessive internal heat. Such food pacifies *Pitta Doṣa* and provides cooling and soothing effects³.

Examples of cold-potency foods include:

Newly harvested rice (*Nava Tandula*), Cow's milk, Green gram (*Mudga*) soup, Milk preparations, Fruits such as orange, sweet lime (Mosambi), banana, avocado, Medicinal plants like *Śatāvarī* and *Guḍūcī*.

8.2 Hot Diet (*Uṣṇa Āhāra*)

A hot diet is advised for individuals suffering from *Kapha*- and *Vāta*-dominant disorders, especially when the body is heavy, moist, or cold in nature. This type of diet stimulates digestion and metabolism³.

Hot-potency foods include: Barley, Chickpea, Sesame, Animal meat, Buffalo milk and ghee, Almonds, Peanuts, Fruits such as mango, jackfruit, and banana, Buttermilk.

8.3 Oleating Diet (*Snigdha Āhāra*)

Oleating food is indicated in *Vāta* disorders, emaciation due to excessive physical activity, dryness of tissues, and conditions requiring lubrication and nourishment³.

Examples of oleating substances include:Ghee and clarified butter, Sesame oil, Milk and milk products, Meat soup (*Māmsarasa*), Almond, Coconut, Sesame seeds, Peanuts.

8.4 Dry Diet (*Rūkṣa Āhāra*)

A dry diet is beneficial for individuals suffering from obesity (*Medoroga*) or *Kapha*-dominant conditions, where the body exhibits excessive oiliness, heaviness, or sluggish metabolism³.

Dry dietary items include:Chickpea, Sorghum (Jowar), Barley, Triphalā (*Harītakī*, *Bibhitakī*, *Āmalakī*), Honey diluted with water, Other dry medicinal preparations.

8.5 Liquid Diet (*Drava Āhāra*)

Liquid food is recommended for debilitated individuals, those experiencing excessive thirst, weakness, or difficulty in digestion, where replenishment of fluids is necessary³.

Examples include:Green gram soup, *Kṣīra* (milk-based rice preparations), Meat soup (*Māmsarasa*),Light liquid gruels.

8.6 Dry and Fat-Free Diet (*Śuṣka Āhāra*)

A dry, fat-free diet is advised in conditions such as skin disorders (*Kuṣṭha*), chronic ulcers, and diabetes (*Madhumeha*), where excessive unctuousness aggravates pathology³.

Such food includes:Chickpea, Sorghum (Jowar),Barley, Preparations devoid of ghee, oil, or other fatty substances,

9. Dietary Classifications and Meal-Time Principles in Ayurveda

“*Doṣa-Śāmaka Āhāra* helps maintain constitutional balance.”¹

9.1 Mono Meal Diet (*Ekakālika Āhāra*)

A monomeal diet is recommended for individuals with weak or impaired digestive capacity. Such persons should consume food only once at a time, allowing adequate

duration for complete digestion before the next intake¹⁴.

9.2 Bi-meal Diet (*Dvikālika Āhāra*)

Individuals with normal and stable digestive power are advised to consume food twice daily. This dietary pattern supports balanced digestion, optimal nourishment, and maintenance of health¹⁴.

9.3 Medicated Diet (*Auśadhi-Yukta Āhāra*)

Medicated food is prescribed for individuals who are unable or unwilling to consume medicines due to intolerance or unpleasant taste. In such cases, medicinal substances are administered along with food to ensure therapeutic efficacy and patient compliance.

9.4 Reduced Diet (*Mātrāhīna Āhāra*)

A reduced diet is indicated for individuals with sluggish or weak digestion, wherein food is consumed in a quantity less than the usual requirement. This approach prevents digestive overload and supports gradual restoration of digestive strength.

9.5 Doṣa-Pacifying Diet (*Doṣa-Śāmaka Āhāra*)

Food selected according to the predominance of *Doṣas*—*Vāta*, *Pitta*, or *Kapha*—is termed *Doṣa-Śāmaka Āhāra*. Such dietary regulation helps maintain constitutional balance and prevents disease manifestation.

9.6 Indiscriminate or Wasteful Diet (*Vṛtārtha Āhāra*)

When a healthy individual disregards dietary rules and consumes all types of food indiscriminately without consideration of quantity, quality, or timing, the practice is termed *Vṛtārtha Āhāra*. Such eating habits gradually impair digestion and predispose to disease.

10. Meal Timing (*Bhojana Kāla*)

Food should be consumed only after the onset of natural hunger, as eating at the proper time enhances digestion and promotes bodily strength¹. Easily digestible food is rapidly assimilated, providing pure nourishment (*Prasāda Rasa*), increasing enthusiasm, facilitating elimination of waste products, and producing a sense of lightness in the body. Reduction of hunger and fatigue indicates successful digestion.

Generally, vegetarian food is digested within 3 to 4 hours. Therefore, subsequent meals should be taken only after this interval.

Recommended Meal Timings:

- Midday meal (Lunch): Between 10:00 am and 12:00 noon
- Evening meal (Dinner): Between 7:00 pm and 9:00 pm

Following this schedule allows sufficient time for digestion, supports metabolic balance, and helps maintain health and disease-free living.

11. Relationship Between Water Intake and Meals

The timing and manner of water intake in relation to meals significantly influence digestion:

Water before meals: Enhances digestive efficiency and promotes leanness. Water after meals: Slows digestion and increases gastric capacity. Water during meals (small sips): Maintains digestive balance, promotes health, and prevents disease.

Drinking large quantities of water immediately after meals is harmful, whereas small sips of water during meals are considered nectar-like¹. It is advisable to sip water while eating and consume a slightly larger quantity about one hour after meals.

12. Concept of Proper Food Intake (*Ahara-Vidhi*) For Health Promotion

A Classical Principle States:

“*Ānna tāri – Ānna māri – Ānna nānā vikāṛī*”¹,

Meaning that hunger itself is a disease, and food is the best medicine for it. While food should be pleasing to the tongue, it must above all be beneficial to the stomach and digestion. Therefore, health should always be prioritised over taste¹.

Food should be consumed in a manner that promotes and sustains health. To achieve this, one must follow a regular and disciplined dietary routine. Food should be taken strictly in accordance with the body’s requirements, and each mouthful should be chewed thoroughly to facilitate proper digestion. Continuous awareness of what is eaten and how it is eaten is essential, with the primary aim of maintaining efficient digestion. Raw foods should not be consumed when cooking is required, and cooked foods should not be taken when they are meant to be eaten raw. Avoid consuming multiple fried foods together, as this burdens digestion. Roughage or bulky foods should be taken in moderation and not in excess of one’s digestive capacity.

Drinking water immediately after waking in the morning is beneficial for health. Consuming milk at night with the evening meal supports nourishment and strength.

Seasonal fruits should be included regularly in the diet, as they help in disease prevention and maintenance of health. Thus, food choices should always be aligned with one’s health needs, and conscious care should be taken in dietary habits to ensure long-term well-being.

Summary

Āhāra is accorded paramount importance in Ayurveda, is described as *Mahābheṣajya*, and forms the foundation of preventive and curative medicine¹²⁴. Classical Ayurvedic texts consistently emphasize that health and

disease are fundamentally determined by dietary practices. As a principal component of the *Tri-Upastambha*, *Āhāra* plays a crucial role in maintaining physiological, metabolic, and psychological homeostasis. This review synthesizes classical concepts elucidating the relationship between *Āhāra* and *Agni*, *Doṣa* balance, *Dhātu* nutrition, and *Ojas* formation, with reference to key principles such as dietary quantity, timing, compatibility, and individualized dietetics. The evidence from classical literature supports the role of regulated diet as both a preventive and therapeutic measure in health maintenance and disease management.

Conclusion

Āhāra, when consumed in accordance with Ayurvedic principles of quality, quantity, timing, compatibility, and individual constitution, functions as *Mahābheṣajya*, supporting *Agni*, preventing *Āma* formation, and ensuring proper nourishment of *Dhātus* and *Ojas*. Classical Ayurvedic literature clearly identifies faulty dietary habits as a primary etiological factor in disease, while disciplined dietary regulation forms the foundation of *Swasthavṛtta* and *Cikitsā*¹²⁴. In the context

of contemporary lifestyle-related disorders, the Ayurvedic dietary framework offers a rational, preventive, and holistic approach to health promotion.

Therefore, *Āhāra* should be recognized not merely as sustenance, but as an essential therapeutic determinant in the preservation and restoration of health.

References

1. Caraka. *Caraka Saṁhitā. Sūtrasthāna*, chapter 27, verse 349. Translated by Ram Karan Sharma and Vaidya Bhagwan Dash, Chaukhambha Orientalia, 2014.
2. Charaka. *Caraka Saṁhitā. Sūtrasthāna*, chapter 28, verse 45. Translated by Ram Karan Sharma and Vaidya Bhagwan Dash, Chaukhambha Orientalia, 2014.
3. Suśruta. *Suśruta Saṁhitā. Sūtrasthāna*, chapter 46, verse 3. Translated by Kaviraj Ambikadutta Shastri, Chaukhambha Sanskrit Sansthan, 2010.
4. Vāgbhaṭa. *Aṣṭāṅga Hr̥daya. Sūtrasthāna*, chapter 8, verse 1. Translated by K. R. Srikantha Murthy, Chaukhambha Krishnadas Academy, 2012.
5. Vyāsa. *The Bhagavad Gītā*. Chapter 17. Translated by Swami Sivananda, The Divine Life Society, 2008.

Conflict of Interest: **Non**

Source of funding: **Nil**

Cite this Article:

Ahara as Mahabhesajya An Ayurvedic Review of Its Role in Health and Disease

Akanksha OP. Dubey, Dr. Satish P. Masavkar, Hemant S. Paradkar

Ayurline: International Journal of Research In Indian Medicine: 2026;10(01):01- 07