

WELLNESS > HOLISTIC HEALTH

# What Is Ayurveda—And Can It Help You?

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## IN THIS ARTICLE

Principles of Ayurveda

Three Doshas

Diet

Treatment

Does It Work?

[VIEW ALL](#)

SKIP TO CONTENT



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Ayurveda, or Ayurvedic medicine, is a traditional medical system that uses a holistic approach to improve physical and mental health. It originated in India in the 2nd century BC and is still widely used there. <sup>[1]</sup><sup>[2]</sup>

Ayurvedic medicine focuses on restoring the balance between a person's mind, body, spirit, and environment. Treatment involves a personalized plan that includes diet, movement, massage, herbs, and other therapies. <sup>[3]</sup>

In the United States, Ayurveda is considered a complementary or alternative health approach. It might offer some benefits, but more research is needed to determine its effectiveness for specific conditions, as well as the safety of products that might contain potentially toxic ingredients. <sup>[2]</sup><sup>[4]</sup>

## Principles of Ayurveda

The word "Ayurveda" is derived from the Sanskrit word *Ayu* (life) and *Veda* (knowledge or science). Ayurveda centers around the idea that imbalance

[SKIP TO CONTENT](#)

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According to Ayurveda, the universe is made of five elements.

Jala (water)

Vayu (air)

Prithvi (earth)

Aakash (space)

Teja (fire)

These elements combine to form three energy types in the human body: Pitta dosha (air and space), Vata dosha (water and fire), and Kapha dosha (earth and water). Together, these Tridoshas help regulate how the body functions.

In Ayurveda, the body is comprised of seven types of tissues known as Sapta Dhatus. These include: <sup>[1]</sup>

Rakta Dhatu (blood tissue)

Rasa (plasma)

Meda (adipose or fat tissue)

Mamsa (muscular tissue)

Majja (bone marrow)

Shukra (reproductive tissue)

Asthi (bone tissue)

Tri Malas and Agni are other important elements in Ayurveda. Tri Malas involves three types of waste products: sweat, urine, and feces. Agni represents the biological fire that helps carry out metabolic processes.

Imbalances in either Tri Malas or Agni can lead to a variety of conditions

SKIP TO CONTENT [stive issues](#) and skin irritation. <sup>[1]</sup>

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Each dosha is associated with specific physical qualities, personality traits, and emotional strengths and weaknesses. Every person has a combination of all three doshas, but one or two doshas are usually dominant.

## Vata Dosha

Vata dosha consists of the elements air and space (also called ether). Vata qualities include cold, light, dry, subtle, and rough. People with strong vata tend to be creative, lighthearted, energetic, and flexible decision-makers. They often have a more delicate build and speak more quickly than other doshas. <sup>[5]</sup> <sup>[6]</sup>

Vata involves processes that are responsible for cell signaling and division, [electrolyte](#) imbalance, waste elimination, movement, and cognition. <sup>[7]</sup> <sup>[5]</sup>

## Pitta Dosha

Pitta dosha consists of the elements fire and water. Pitta qualities include hot, liquid, sharp, and pungent. People with strong pitta tend to be strong-willed, direct, and fierce with opponents. They often have a medium, more muscular build. <sup>[5]</sup> <sup>[6]</sup>

Pitta involves processes responsible for metabolism, [digestion](#), [vision](#), and temperature regulation. <sup>[7]</sup> <sup>[5]</sup>

## Kapha Dosha

Kapha dosha consists of the elements water and earth. Kapha qualities include soft, cold, stable, and heavy. People with strong kapha tend to be calm, loving, and caring. They often have a strong build and move more slowly than other doshas. <sup>[5]</sup> <sup>[6]</sup>

[SKIP TO CONTENT](#)

## Ayurvedic Diet

Ayurveda believes that diet affects your genetic constitution (Prakriti) and supports healing processes. Diet also affects the three doshas.

Ayurvedic medicine includes following a diet that helps bring your predominant dosha into greater balance with your other doshas. For example, Vata is light, rough, and cold. Eating heavy, smooth, and warm foods can help bring a Vata person into greater balance. <sup>[8]</sup>

Here are some diet recommendations based on predominant doshas: <sup>[8]</sup> <sup>[9]</sup>

**Vata:** Eat foods that are fresh, warm, and heavy with sweet, sour, or salty tastes. Avoid bitter and astringent foods that leave a drying sensation in your mouth, like apples or unripe bananas. Too much fasting leads to greater Vata imbalance.

**Pitta:** Eat foods that are hot, less oily, and light. Avoid sour or salty foods, as well as [canned foods](#), vegetable oils, instant foods, [coffee](#), and vinegar. A mostly vegetarian diet helps balance Pitta.

**Kapha:** Eat warm and light foods with a bitter or astringent taste. Avoid sweet, sour, or salty foods, as well as frozen foods and cold water. A lower-carbohydrate and lower-fat diet supports Kapha.

**RELATED:** [The 12 Best Herbs and Spices for Better Health](#)

## Ayurvedic Treatment

Ayurveda focuses on personalized treatments to prevent illness and

[SKIP TO CONTENT](#) | as reduce symptoms. Ayurvedic practitioners will ask

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determine whether you're experiencing any imbalances or possible symptoms. They will then suggest a treatment approach that aligns with your health condition and imbalances. <sup>[3]</sup>

Ayurvedic medicine includes Panchakarma, a treatment method that cleanses and rejuvenates the body and promotes longevity. The steps include: <sup>[1]</sup>

1. Preparing the body for the treatment
2. Main treatment
3. Procedures to return the body to its normal state

Ayurvedic treatment options include herbs, dietary changes, [detoxification](#), Ayurvedic [massage](#) (which uses warm herbal oils), [meditation](#), and yoga. <sup>[7]</sup>

## Does Ayurveda Work?

Several clinical trials and systematic reviews suggest that Ayurveda can be effective, particularly the herbs and supplements used in treatment.

For example, one clinical trial of 440 people with knee [osteoarthritis](#) found that Ayurvedic preparations of plant extracts reduced pain and improved function as well as the non-steroidal anti-inflammatory (NSAID) drug Celebrex (celecoxib). <sup>[10]</sup> Ayurvedic herbs such as black [cumin](#), garlic, and guggul have been reported to moderately improve [hypercholesterolemia](#) (high cholesterol). <sup>[11]</sup>

Research often focuses on particular elements of Ayurveda, like specific herbs, yoga, or massage. Other potential benefits of Ayurvedic medicine include:

[SKIP TO CONTENT](#)      raised cortisol levels, which is one of the effects of [stress](#) <sup>[12]</sup>

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### [Improving cognitive function](#)

Improving [sleep quality](#) and efficiency<sup>[16]</sup>

Ayurveda still lacks sufficient scientific evidence. There's also great variability within Ayurveda—for example, in the components and dosage of different preparations.<sup>[17]</sup>

Larger, more rigorous studies that monitor participants for longer periods of time could help determine potential benefits of Ayurvedic treatment approaches for different conditions.

## Possible Risks and Side Effects

Ayurveda is most often well tolerated. However, there are some potential risks.

Some herbs can lead to gastrointestinal side effects such as:<sup>[18]</sup>

[Diarrhea](#)

[Constipation](#)

[Nausea](#)

Vomiting

[Heartburn](#)

More severe side effects include:<sup>[18]</sup>

[Ulcer](#) (painful sore on the lining of the stomach or lower intestine)

[Kidney disease](#)

[Bradycardia](#) (low heart rate)

SKIP TO CONTENT [on](#) (low blood pressure)

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Some commonly used herbs are contraindicated for certain conditions.

For example, curcumin (turmeric) slows [blood clotting](#), so it can worsen some bleeding conditions. <sup>[18]</sup>

More research is needed to determine the safety of Ayurvedic treatments during pregnancy and breastfeeding, as well as for children. The origin of the product is not always clear, and some products might be harmful. <sup>[2]</sup>

## Drug Interactions

Herbs used in Ayurveda might interact with medications. Here are a few herbs commonly used in Ayurveda and possible interactions:

[Ashwagandha](#): Diabetes medications, immunosuppressants (medications that reduce your body's immune response), anticonvulsants (anti-seizure medications), and [thyroid](#) hormone medications <sup>[19]</sup>

[Ginger](#): Anticoagulants (blood thinners) like aspirin, Coumadin (warfarin), and heparin (brand names include Lovenox and Fragmin) <sup>[18]</sup>

Holy basil: Thyroid hormone medications, anticoagulation drugs, and antiplatelet drugs (medications that prevent blood clots) <sup>[20]</sup>

Always consult with a licensed healthcare provider before taking any Ayurvedic herbs.

## Heavy Metal Poisoning

Some Ayurvedic supplements contain heavy metals like lead, mercury, or arsenic. One meta-review of 220 case reports and series found that most participants had elevated levels of heavy metals. Many people had levels of

[SKIP TO CONTENT](#)



Another small study of people who use Ayurvedic supplements found elevated blood levels of lead in 40% of participants. About 25% of the preparations exceeded the recommended maximum level of lead and about 50% exceeded the recommended maximum level of mercury. <sup>[22]</sup>

## Other Considerations

Ayurvedic practice or study has no significant regulation in the United States. Practitioners are not required to have licenses. <sup>[2]</sup>

Like other supplements, Ayurvedic preparations are not regulated by the Federal Drug Administration (FDA) The effects of these products vary from person to person and depend on many variables, including type, dosage, frequency of use, and interactions with current medications.

Always speak with a licensed healthcare provider or pharmacist before starting any supplements, especially if you're pregnant, have a medical condition, or are taking any medications. <sup>[2]</sup>

## A Quick Review

Ayurveda is one of the oldest medical systems. It originated in India and is still widely used there. Ayurvedic medicine focuses on [holistic](#) approaches that promote health by balancing the body, mind, and spirit.

Ayurvedic treatment involves dietary changes, herbs, massage, yoga, and meditation. These treatment components have many potential benefits. However, more research is needed to determine how Ayurveda might affect specific symptoms and conditions. Possible risks include side effects of herbs, drug interactions, and heavy metal poisoning. It's important to talk to your healthcare provider before trying Ayurveda.

to the use of complementary or alternative medicine based on limited available research. Not all complementary and alternative medicines have been evaluated for safety and efficacy in clinical trials. Always consult a licensed healthcare professional for diagnosis and treatment for any health conditions and inform them about any change you make to your regimen.

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doctor meeting  
with a patient

 Shungite  
crumbs on a white  
background

 Female  
massage therapist  
is applying Thai  
massage

 a woman  
relaxing in the  
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 A woman sitting  
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 Person meeting  
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of Chlorella

 Woman  
receiving a  
massage

 Health Photo  
Composite -  
Chakras

 Young  
multiracial or  
Latina woman  
meditating at

 An Asian woman  
practicing  
mindfulness by a  
window

 Person sitting  
with eyes closed,  
waving palo santo  
stick for relaxation

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using a gua sha  
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