

Food Combining

by Dr. Vasant Lad

It is no surprise to see on the market today so many digestive and dietary aids for the stomach, along with pills for gas and indigestion. Most of these conditions likely begin with poor food combining. This is a subject of much debate amid the growing concern about diet and the many theories on the topic.

Ayurveda, an ancient holistic science of healing, offers a logical approach for determining correct diet based upon the elements comprising an individual's constitution: Vata, Pitta and Kapha. This approach is quite different from the contemporary view of a balanced diet, based on eating from various food groups. Ayurveda believes that understanding the individual is the key to finding a truly balanced diet. It teaches that the gastric fire or *agni* in the stomach and digestive tract is the main gate through which nutrients enter the tissues and then pass along to individual cells, to maintain the life functions.

In the Ayurvedic literature there are five types of nutritional disorders:

1. **Quantitative dietary deficiency** - includes under-nutrition due to insufficient food and even starvation.
2. **Qualitative dietary deficiency** - resulting in malnutrition, toxic conditions and lack of essential nutrients. Certain **food combinations** disturb the normal functioning of the gastric fire and interfere with the state of our *vata, pitta and kapha*. This disturbance may create a toxic substance called *ama*, which is the root cause of many ailments.
3. **Qualitative and quantitative over-nutrition** - includes emotional overeating which can result in obesity and/or high cholesterol which can lead to hypertension, heart attack or paralysis.
4. **Toxins in food** - certain foods can cause toxemia and lead to digestive disorders.
5. **Foods unsuitable to one's constitution** - may affect natural resistance and cause disease.

These five factors are closely connected to the strength of *agni* (gastric fire). **There are four types of *agni*:**

1. **Vishama Agni.** Due to *vata dosha* the gastric fire becomes vitiated, causing irregular appetite, indigestion and gases. Emotionally this can result in anxiety, insecurity, fear, and neurological or mental problems.
2. **Tikshna Agni.** *Pitta dosha* is responsible for this type of *agni* disorder. It may cause hyper-metabolism, hyperacidity, heartburn and hypoglycemia leading to inflammatory diseases.
3. **Manda Agni.** This is due to an excess *kapha* condition, leading to slow metabolism, overweight, allergies and congestive diseases.
4. **Sama Agni.** This type of *agni* is the result of balanced *tri-dosha*. A person having this type of *agni* can eat almost any type of food without difficulty. Digestion, absorption and elimination are all normal.

The nutritionist should give consideration to these types of *agni* when making suggestions concerning diet.

According to Ayurveda, every food has its own taste (*rasa*), a heating or cooling energy (*virya*) and a post-digestive effect (*vipaka*). Some also possess *prabhava*, an unexplained effect.

So while it is true that an individual's *agni* largely determines how well or poorly food is digested, food combinations are also of great importance. When two or more foods having different taste, energy and post-digestive effect are combined, *agni* can become overloaded, inhibiting the enzyme system and resulting in the production of toxins. Yet these same foods, if eaten separately, might well stimulate *agni*, be digested more quickly and even help to burn *ama*.

Poor combining can produce indigestion, fermentation, putrefaction and gas formation and, if prolonged, can lead to toxemia and disease. For example, eating bananas with milk can diminish *agni*, change the intestinal flora, produce toxins and may cause sinus congestion, cold, cough and allergies. Although both of these foods have a sweet taste and a cooling energy, their post-digestive effect is very different - bananas are sour while milk is sweet. This causes confusion to our digestive system and may result in toxins, allergies and other imbalances.

Similarly, milk and melons should not be eaten together. Both are cooling, but milk is laxative and melon diuretic. Milk requires more time for digestion. Moreover the stomach acid required to digest the melon causes the milk to curdle, so Ayurveda advises against taking milk with sour foods.

These incompatible food combinations not only disturb the digestion but also cause confusion in the intelligence of our cells, which can lead to many different diseases. Before you say "This is MUCH too complicated, how will I ever figure it out?", there are some useful guidelines to introduce you to these concepts. And remember that Ayurveda is a strong proponent of the "go slowly" school of thought. You might want to introduce yourself to food combining by eating fruit by itself, as many fruits create a sour and indigestible "wine" in the stomach when mixed with other food. Once you have adopted this change into your eating habits, try other suggestions from the list below. As a general principal, avoid eating lots of raw and cooked foods together or fresh foods with leftovers.

VARIOUS FACTORS WHICH CAN LESSEN THE EFFECT OF BAD FOOD COMBINATIONS:

- ◆ A strong digestive fire (if we are so blessed) can be the most powerful tool of all to deal with "bad" food combinations.
- ◆ Different quantities of each food involved in a combination can sometimes help significantly. For instance equal quantities *by weight* of ghee and honey are a bad combination—ghee is cooling, but honey is heating—whereas mixing a 2:1 ratio is not toxic. The reason? *Prahava*, the unexplainable.
- ◆ Very often spices and herbs are added in Ayurvedic cooking to help make foods compatible or to ease a powerful effect, e.g. cooling cilantro in very spicy food.
- ◆ If our bodies have become accustomed to a certain food combination through many years of use, such as eating cheese with apples, then it is likely that our body has made some adaptation or become accustomed to this. Which is not to say that we should continue this practice, but to explain why the newcomer to apples and cheese may experience a strong case of indigestion whilst the "old-timer" digests it adequately.