



Ask Ayurveda

Ayurveda promotes longevity through rejuvenation, but does Ayurveda also help children?

Ayurveda is a very vast and elaborate medicinal science, containing a huge amount of medical knowledge. It is said, that when mankind first started suffering from illnesses, the wise men (sages) learned from Indra the knowledge of medicine. Gradually the huge amount of knowledge was divided systematically into 8 branches, in Sanskrit named "Ashtangas" (Ashta means "eight", Anga means "part"). One of these 8 branches is called "Bala chikitsa" (Bala means "child" and Chikitsa means "treatment"); also known as "Kumaraya Bhritya". Bala Chikitsa is equivalent to Pediatrics in modern medicine. This branch of Ayurveda deals with the diagnosis and treatment of diseases related to children.

In Ayurveda, the basis for woman and child care is to be found in the major ancient Ayurvedic treatises: Ashtanga Hridaya, Sushruta Samhita, Charaka Samhita and Vagbhata Samhita. Vagbhata Samhita and Ashtanga Hridaya (both by Acharya Vagbhata) describe extensive guidelines about day-to-day care for the pregnant woman and her new born child.

CHILD CARE

Bala Chikitsa covers child care from intrauterine ("inside the womb") life, until the age of puberty. Not only the mother's health during pregnancy is important and should be guarded, but care should already be taken even before conception. Ayurveda emphasises that the would-be mother and father should be physically, mentally and emotionally fit before the conception, in order to have a good pregnancy. Ayurveda also considers the woman as the first teacher of a child, and every aspect of proper development of a child is directly linked to the physical and mental health of the mother. Even

more so, the mother's sound health is necessary for healthy upbringing of children. Therefore Ayurveda has described a specific diet plan and routine for women before, during and after delivery. To ensure proper growth and development of the foetus, herbal decoctions, to be taken every month, are given to a pregnant mother. These are especially recommended to women who have a history of recurrent abortions or miscarriages. Specific conditions like nausea, vomiting, constipation etc. that occur during the pregnancy have effective treatments in Ayurveda. Charaka, one of the ancient Ayurvedic scholars who had great influence in Ayurveda, describes the growth of the foetus in great detail in his books. He even describes in minute details, a method called "Pun-sanvan Vidhi" for having a child of one's desired gender, intelligence and constitution. To determine a proper diagnosis for children can be a bit difficult. Almost all diseases that affect adults attack children too. That's why Ayurveda believes it is essential to strengthen a child's immunity as soon as possible, starting with the health condition of the mother – even before birth. Ayurvedic treatment focuses on developing and enhancing the immune system of children in a gradual manner. For this reason, Ayurveda mainly uses herbal preparations, which which health problems of children can be easily controlled. Bala chikitsa covers special care that can be given to the child in each and every stage of growth. A specially prepared ointment is applied to the whole body, excluding the head, mainly to avoid future diseases caused due to Vata. For babies it is also possible to sterilize the baby's room by smoking medicinal herbs that have sterilizing and cleaning properties. Ayurvedic remedies are effective for common problems in children, like pains or colic, teething, nappy rash, gastrointestinal problems, cough and cold, as well as for the more serious problems. Herbal oil massage, herbal preparations such as Chyavanprash, and other herbal remedies are used for treatment of diseases in children.

SAFETY

Most of the Ayurvedic herbs and herbal compounds can be completely safely used in common childhood illnesses. Even though kids and children are given much lower doses of medicines than adults, of course.

BREASTFEEDING

The best food for a new-born baby is breast milk. According to Ayurveda, breast milk is the safest and the easiest way of providing the child with nutrition. It helps the baby to build his immune system and reduces the risk of infections. Breast milk contains vitamins, minerals and enzymes, which help the baby develop its digestive system. After delivery, a mother has to be conscious of what she eats, because the same diet becomes the source of food for the baby. According to Ayurveda, love and affection for the baby, a happy state of mind with adequate rest and sleep, and a good nutritious diet are essential for successful breastfeeding. Besides that, certain plants and foods like Kheer (rice pudding) of Halim (garden cress), Methi (fenugreek), poppy seeds and dates, anise seed, cumin seed, caraway, and remedies made up of Shatavari (*Asparagus racemosus*), Goat's Rue (*Galega officinalis*), Shwet or Safed Musali (*Asparagus Adscendens*) and Jivanti (*Lepadenia Reticulata*) etc. may help to improve the quality and quantity of breast milk.

During breastfeeding, Ayurveda recommends:

- eating a varied diet, containing lots of fresh fruits and vegetables, and plenty of fresh calcium-rich products. The food items that an expecting or nursing mother takes, must be pure and free from any toxins like pesticides or chemicals.
- Avoid alcohol and tobacco and limit caffeine intake (a cup or two of coffee per day is alright, but too much of caffeine is bad for babies who are being breastfed).
- Also avoid spicy foods (babies tend to give hints or symptoms to certain spicy foods that change the flavor of the milk. Too much of spicy or gassy foods should be avoided, as the baby may become irritable or grumpy, or develop gas due to it).
- Drink lots of water, but avoid carbonated water. During delivery, the body loses a lot of water, which makes the mother thirsty in the first few days. Many mothers feel thirsty while breastfeeding. Keep a glass of water with you while feeding. Juices, dahls and milk are recommended fluids.

THE TRIDOSHA AND CHILDREN

Vata, Pitta and Kapha, the Tridosha, are unique in Ayurveda. The three doshas are found in all that is matter and govern all biological, psychological and physiological functions. They are éverywhere, and in everyone of us, but the combination and proportion of doshas will vary per person. This results in

unique physical and psychological characteristics for each individual. No two people are or will ever be exactly the same. The dosha that is most dominant at birth will affect our personality, immunity, characteristics etc the most. It is easiest to observe and identify the doshas of children as they tend to act and respond in accordance to their true natures. The body constitution does have genetic components, but a family doesn't necessarily have to be dominant in one dosha or another. A Kapha mother and father very well could have a Pitta child. A Pitta child, for example, could get her blue eyes from her Pitta grandmother, or her athletic ability from her Pitta uncle. According to Ayurveda, it is important to know our body constitution, which dosha(s) is/are dominant, in order to become more "acquainted" with our true nature and become healthier individuals. This also applies to our children. When we know our children's dominant dosha, we will understand their personalities better, their needs and natural rhythms, but first and foremost: we will be able to parent from a place of love rather than expectation. For instance, a Vata child will have difficulties with changes and will be nervous going to a new school. Knowing this, we will recognize and understand his anxiety beforehand. A Kapha child, on the other hand, will have difficulty waking up in the morning and needs some stimulation to go to school.



Here are some general examples of how the doshas tend to manifest themselves in children:

Vata child

A Vata child has unlimited imagination, and can easily be caught day-dreaming. He/she is always moving about, doesn't want to go to bed, eats lots of small meals and has varied appetite. Physically, the Vata child is slight, can be tall or short, but always looks skinny: he/she has narrow hips and shoulders. Vata persons learn things quickly, but forget just

as quickly, or lose interest. Very often, children with ADHD are Vata dominant. Vata children really need a point in their day, when they can quiet their minds and relax. Often, this is best done around nap time or bed time. Overall they will be very creative and love to make things, draw, paint, write etc. They need warmth, and definitely also physical warmth (hugs and kisses).



Pitta child

Pitta children love to play in groups and love to be the leader. They have lots of energy and are fond of sports, in which they probably excel, because of their competitive nature. Team sports are great for them: they are very motivated, but also want to be the best in everything. The challenge for them is to come to terms with their competitive nature. They are passionate children, but can be very emotional and dramatic. Pitta kids are great at memorizing and love to read. A Pitta child has average build and average appetite, but will get cranky when hungry or late in eating. They are prone to rashes, and food allergies and sensitivities.

Kapha child

Kapha children are very caring and affectionate. They are very loyal, but also very sensitive, with the risk of easily feeling hurt. Overall they are joyful and content. They tend to be more solidly built. They're "thicker" and more resistant to illness. They love to eat and have a sweet tooth. Their diets need to be watched so that they don't overeat. They need to be stimulated into activities. They love the more quiet activities, but the risk is that they will sit in front of the TV all day or play video-games. They have great memory, but need more time to learn new things (and then they will never forget it). They learn best by association, through story-telling and experiences. You need to be patient with Kapha children, work at their speed and don't give up. Kapha children need movement and exercise. Even though they may be hesitant to get up and start moving, playing outdoors is vital for them.

FOOD AND DIET FOR CHILDREN

The doshas are also subject to natural cycles of change, on a daily and seasonal basis, and during the stages of life. Vata is predominant during the latter part of one's life, during the fall season and during late afternoon. Pitta is predominant during middle age, summer and midday, and Kapha is predominant during childhood, spring and late morning. Hence, it is believed that the majority of childhood diseases are related to Kapha dosha- disturbance. For this reason, Ayurveda recommends to keep children away from foods and activities that would aggravate Kapha. This means that children prone to frequent illnesses are advised to avoid too many sweets, ice-cold food and drinks, (buffalo) milk, playing in water and sleeping during the day (applicable to children older than 4 years).

Ayurveda's key recommendation for maximizing children's health is: regulating lifestyle and dietary habits. Consistent meal times and regular (early) bedtimes contribute to both physiological and emotional balance for all body constitutions. Irregular routine very quickly aggravates Vata, which in turn will influence Pitta and Kapha, and this can be the basis for all sorts of behavioral or physiological future problems. Irregularity is detrimental to the tender nervous systems of children. They need consistency in their lives.

Overall, the child's diet should be proper and nutritious. This means consisting of fresh and natural (organic) foods, and emphasizing on fruits, vegetables and whole grains. For each body type, certain foods should be favored and others avoided. Vata types should favor foods with salt, sour, and sweet tastes. They need more ghee, oil or fat in their meals, as this helps soothe Vata. In order to ground them, their foods should be warm and soothing, such as warm milk, warm soup, warm milky cereal, and long-cooked stews and dahls. Pitta children should avoid hot and spicy foods, and eat more foods with bitter, sweet, or astringent tastes. Kaphas benefit from warm, light food, cooked with a minimum of butter, oil, or sugar. Foods with pungent, bitter, or astringent tastes are especially good for Kapha. Sweet, juicy fruits are good for all children. If your child suffers from frequent infections, or has other continuous health problems, please consult with an Ayurvedic specialist. Weakened immunity is a sign that something in your child's diet, routine or emotions is putting a strain on his/her system. An ayurvedic assessment can help determine any imbalances and guide you towards diet, lifestyle and practices which will help to correct these imbalances before they develop further.

If you have a question for "Ask Ayurveda", please send it to info@pdiaurveda.com and perhaps you will see your question answered in one of our next issues.