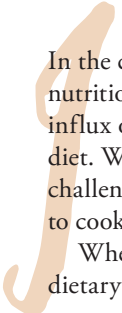


# THE Yogic diet

According to yogic wisdom that spans almost 10,000 years, our nutrition is the foundation of our health. EMMA PALMER examines how the yogic diet and physical practices work in synchronicity to support optimal wellbeing.





In the complex and contrasting world of nutritional science, there seems to be a constant influx of emerging research around food and diet. With so many new findings, it can become challenging to know what to eat, when to eat, how to cook and how to eat.

When we compare the complex modern dietary approach to that of ancient civilisations, we see that our ancestors had an intuitive understanding of nutrition and its role in our health. But somewhere along the way, we lost this intuitive connection to food and forgot to live by Hippocrates' quote, "Let food be thy medicine and medicine be thy food". So, how can we work to reclaim our connection with food and our bodies, and what can the dietary principles of our ancestors teach us?

The ancient yogis explored, through direct experience, the impact of different foods on our physical health and assessed their influence on our mind, emotions, moods, sleep cycles and energy levels. Similarly, in Ayurveda, India's ancient system of mind-body medicine, practitioners first review an individual's nutritional status and then look at working with yoga postures and breathing practices to support systemic health. As a yoga teacher, I've seen first-hand that when we dedicate ourselves to a consistent yoga practice, our bodies unforgivingly tell us what they need and, interestingly, what they don't.

## THE PRINCIPLES OF YOGIC NUTRITION

The word 'diet' is derived from the Greek word *diaita*, meaning 'way of life'. Interestingly, this too forms the basis of the yogic approach to nutrition, herbal medicine and lifestyle. The yogis adopted a balanced diet that supported cellular health and renewal. They also considered the impact that nutrition had, not only on our physical health, but also on our emotional, mental and spiritual wellbeing, recognising the symbiotic relationship of the body as a whole.

Ancient classical yogic texts such as the Hatha Yoga Pradipika – written by Svatiarama in the 15th Century – approached nutrition as a means to create greater spiritual awareness. In his writings, Svatiarama incorporated a number of cleansing practices to enhance the function of the digestive system to successfully metabolise, assimilate and process the ingested food, herbs and spices. Part of those cleansing practices included daily *asana* [yoga postures] and *pranayama* [breath work] practices to improve the function of the gastrointestinal tract.

## YOGA, VEGANISM & VEGETARIANISM

One of the most common questions I'm asked as a yoga teacher is: 'Should students of yoga be vegetarian?' This is often an organic conclusion that students naturally come to, as the first *yama* [code of restraint] is *ahimsa*, which means 'to do no harm'. When I became a vegetarian almost 20 years ago, it was a personal decision; I had dabbled in vegetarianism five years earlier, and for one reason or another, I didn't continue. It was on Boxing Day, 1998, when my aunts bought me a book about the wisdom of Australian animals. In the inside cover was a quote by Leonardo Di Vinci, which wrote: "The time will come when men such as I will look upon the murder of animals as they now look on the murder of men." I thought about that quote a lot that morning, and my decision to never eat meat again was decided when our entrée was served; a dish consisting of three platters of baby quails. I've never eaten meat since.

### *The yogis adopted a balanced diet that supported cellular health and renewal.*

I didn't educate myself on vegetarianism during that time. I just stopped eating meat and started eating cheese and pasta, and my health suffered as a result. It has taken me a long time to educate myself about consuming adequate levels of protein, iron, calcium and vitamin B12, and how being vegetarian can support my health and vitality. I believe we come to these decisions in our own time and on our own terms. No-one has the right to push or enforce their beliefs, however, they can educate us in order to give us the information to make our own decisions and provide us with the right health care practitioners that can support that decision.

In my experience, veganism and vegetarianism aren't diets; they're lifestyles that underpin the very essence of *ahimsa*. However, it can also be harmful to oneself when not making an educated and well-informed choice, and harming the body as a result. In the words of Sharon Gannon, a world-renowned yogi and vegan activist: "Eating a vegetarian diet will do more to help bring you to a place of peace, harmony and wellbeing than any other thing you can do". Ultimately, the choice is yours, and yours alone.

# THE SUBTLE ENERGY OF FOOD

Food isn't just dense matter. All foods have an energetic component. In traditional yogic literature, nutrition, herbs and spices are categorised into specific groups or qualities referred to as *sattvic*, *tamasic* and *rajasic*. These qualities determine not only whether the foods are dense or light, but also how they influence our mood, energy levels, spiritual state and cognitive function.

## SATTVIC FOODS

Traditionally, foods high in the vital force of *prana* [life force energy] and pure in nature are considered sattvic and the most ideal to consume for a dedicated practitioner of yoga. This includes foods that are easy to digest and nourish the body with natural vitamins and minerals with the capacity to provide sustainable energy throughout the day. When we operate from a place of vital energy, we are more likely to move through our daily commitments without feeling drained or tired. This further leads to a healthy and healing sleep, as the digestive system operates more efficiently throughout the day enhancing cellular renewal during sleep. Sattvic foods include nuts and seeds, green leafy vegetables, fresh fruit, legumes and herbal tea. Foods and drinks that are light in their most natural form and are easy to digest and process are considered sattvic in nature. When we consume vital, nutrient-rich foods, we notice several welcome responses such as increased vitality, increased concentration span and a happier outlook on our daily lives and experiences.

## TAMASIC FOODS

Conversely, foods that have the propensity to drain our energy levels are considered tamasic in nature and negatively influence our vitality on all levels. When we consume food that is dense, processed and heavy, we tend to feel more tired, drowsy and depleted, with very little motivation or desire to get moving. A tamasic nature also lends itself to the habit of overeating and the inability to suppress the appetite with insatiable cravings for sugary foods. These types of foods can lower our mood and cause irritability while creating fluctuation in our blood



sugar levels. Tamasic foods include alcohol, along with overripe, stale and fried foods with a high sugar.

## RAJASIC FOODS

The final food type is rajasic foods, considered to be more stimulating to the mind and the body and more likely to create restlessness, impatience, anxiety and irritability. People who fall into the rajasic state are those who tend to eat too quickly, leading to poor digestion with an inability to break down foods and more likely to experience indigestion after eating. Some examples of rajasic foods include stimulants such as black tea and caffeine, strong herbs and spices and the consumption of excess salt.

## THE MIND-GUT CONNECTION

We tend to feel happier when we consume a *sattvic* diet and this may be related to the healthy presence of gut flora and the increased production of the neurotransmitter serotonin, which is found in the gut. The latest research shows we produce up to 90 per cent of serotonin in the gastrointestinal tract. When you look at the physical anatomy of the brain, you can see the ripple-like tissue known as the cerebral cortex, and when you compare this to the grooves of the small and large intestine, the gut just looks like one enormous brain. With this knowledge, is it any wonder our mood is directly affected by our food choices and state of our gut health?

The gut is considered to be our second brain, and both brains communicate with one another throughout the day and night. When you throw anxiety-inducing foods – such as processed, deep fried and salty foods – in the mix, it's a recipe for disaster.

## THE FIRE OF DIGESTION

To the yogi, the fire of digestion and metabolism is critical, and without it we become more vulnerable to disease – not just of the digestive system, but on systemic health as a whole. A form of energy known as *tejas* is responsible to nourish and fire up the digestive process and boost metabolism throughout the whole body.

Aside from helping us digest our foods, *tejas* is also responsible for how we digest and process our own life experiences and support cognitive health and function. When this energy force is

***To the yogi, the fire of digestion and metabolism is critical, and without it we become more vulnerable to disease – not just of the digestive system, but on systemic health as a whole.***



low, the digestive system is more likely to be sluggish with decreased metabolic function.

The vitality of digestion is also essential, and from a yogic perspective, it is the *samana vayu* that ensures a healthy gut. Samana vayu is one of the 49 winds of energy that controls the movement of prana, or energy, as it moves around the body. It is located between the heart and the navel, and controls the digestive system and associated organs including the liver, intestines, pancreas and stomach. Samana vayu influences metabolism and activates the circulatory system, assimilation and distribution of nutrients throughout the body. Asana and pranayama practices directly influence and sustain samana vayu, which perhaps is one of the reasons why we notice healthy changes in the gut through a dedicated yoga practice.

### ASANA FOR DIGESTION

The most powerful action to detoxify the organs of the gastrointestinal tract comes from the practice of asana, including spine twists and inversions. The theory is spine twists cleanse the internal organs removing stale blood and allowing a fresh, oxygenated nutrient dense blood supply to be absorbed. This theory also aims to increase tone of the gastrointestinal tract, thereby improving digestive function including the assimilation of food, breakdown of fats in support of the liver and gall bladder, transportation of nutrients, as well as relaxing the enteric nervous system that dominates how our emotions and thoughts impact on the process of digestion.

The yogic approach to overcoming a sluggish digestive system is to practise inversions and, where possible, to include axial rotation of the thoracic spine with inversions. During our normal day-to-day activities, the body is mostly in an upright position, which is the opposite direction of the ascending colon which moves waste matter. In the practice of inversions, peristalsis is increased and this moves



KULA ATHLETIC



waste up towards the transverse colon and then out towards the descending colon. This inward pressure stimulates smooth muscle contraction of the gut to further eliminate waste. Furthermore,

inversions support the liver to drain accumulated venous blood and move it back to the heart. When the liver is decongested in this way, the influx of additional oxygenated blood improves overall digestive function.

### PRANAYAMA FOR DIGESTION

Studies have shown that yogic deep breathing practices support the body's ability to move waste by multiplying the lymphatic cleansing process 15 times the normal rate by means of creating a vacuum that draws lymph fluid through the blood stream and accelerates the pace at which the lymph eliminates waste.

The most profound and cleansing breathing

practice in yoga is *kapalabhati*. The practice of kapalabhati applies strong exhalations generated by powerful abdominal contractions of the lower belly, which pushes air out of the lower lobes of the lungs while inhalations release the contraction, which then draws air back into the lungs. The rapid exhalation assists in the removal of accumulated waste within the cells and tissues of the lungs and digestive system.

Nutrition is our primal source of medicine. It always has been and always will be. Scientific findings are showing this time and time again and as we journey back through to the roots of the yogic journey, they too knew that. Not only do our nutritional choices impact the health of the body, but they also influence the way we think, move, feel and the quality within which we live our day to day lives. ■







WHAT'S ESSENTIAL  
TO YOU?

DIGESTIVE &  
IMMUNE HEALTH.



Premium quality Healthy Essentials 35 Billion Broad Spectrum Probiotic 10 contains 35 billion beneficial bacteria that may help support your optimal digestive and immune health.

**HEALTHY ESSENTIALS™**   
— PART OF YOUR EVERYDAY HEALTH —

Always read the label. Use only as directed.

CHC72388-0517

Available from  
Health Food Stores:

