

# Ayurveda and the digestion

By Bita Bitajian: Ayurvedic practitioner, Ayurvedic yoga therapist and ERYT-500

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## Ayurveda and the digestion



Eating and digestion are daily, life-sustaining events. According to Ayurveda a healthy digestive system is a cornerstone of well-being and that every disease is believed to arise from inefficient digestion. Food consumed will not provide good health unless it is digested properly. Even if the food is high quality and pure, it will be harmful to the body if it is not fully digested. The digestion of food is carried out in the stomach (jathar) which is referred metaphorically as “fire” (agni). The agnis/fires are descriptive categories for the action of various types of enzymes and metabolic processes. You want a balanced agni that is neither too weak nor too excessive. The quality of agni varies depending upon one’s dosha: vata, pitta, or kapha. In vata and kapha types, agni tends to be weak and the digestive system “cold,” sluggish, or irregular, which can result in malabsorption disorders, chronic constipation, loose stools, and gas. In pittas, the fires of agni can become excessive and cause heartburn, acid reflux, colitis, and other burning sensations.

## The digestive system

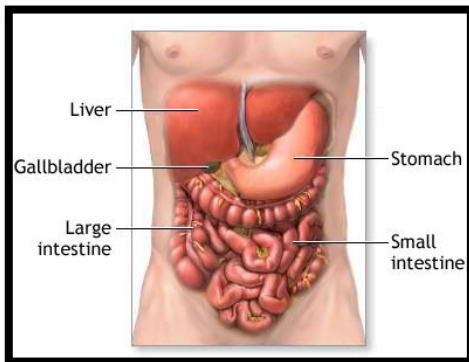
The digestive system is a group of organs working together to assimilate food into energy and basic nutrients to feed the entire body. In order to use the food we eat, our body has to break the food down into smaller molecules that it can process; it also has to excrete waste. Most of the digestive organs (like the stomach and intestines) are tube-like and contain the food as it makes its way through the body. Food passes through a long tube inside the body known as the gastrointestinal tract (GI tract). The GI tract is a series of hollow organs joined in a long, twisting tube from the mouth to the anus. The hollow organs that make up the GI tract are the mouth, esophagus, stomach,



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small intestine, large intestine, which includes the rectum—and anus. Food enters the mouth and passes to the through the hollow organs of the GI tract. Bacteria in the GI tract, called gut flora or microbiome also help with digestion. Parts of the nervous and circulatory systems also play roles in the digestive process.

## The Digestive Process



**-Mouth:** In the mouth, food is tasted with the tongue and chewed with the teeth. Salivary glands provide moisture and help break down the food. These actions are all enabled by the action of prana vata.

**-stomach:** When the food reaches the stomach, it is kneaded into a dough-like consistency by kledaka kapha, and then exposed to jatharagni, the digestive fire. The jatharagni (gastric acid) heats the food and, with the assistance of pachaka pitta, forms the nutrient fluid or ahara rasa. Pitta is a vital part of the entire digestive process, as it is responsible for heat, energy, acidic actions (such as gastric activity) and all conversion functions, such as those undertaken in the stomach and liver. The nutrient plasma nourishes and forms the seven tissues or dhatus. This nutrient plasma or ahara rasa is carried to the dhatus by samana vata. The portion of food with no nutritive value is termed mala or waste material.

**-The waste or mala** is transported by apana vata to the colon and rectum to be eliminated. We can compare the digestive process to the cooking of food externally. It requires a stove, a pot, fuel, air, fire, water, food and someone to utilize it all. Internally the pot is the stomach, the stove the small intestine, the fuel is the previously digested food that triggers the enzymes, the air is your peristaltic movement, the water the gastric mucosal secretions, the organizer is your prana (life force) while the fire is your jathara agni or acids and enzymes.

## The Importance of jatharagni or digestive fire

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Food is responsible for providing nutrition to the dhatus. Food is required for the formation of ojas (vital fluid), immunity, maintenance of body and giving luster to the skin. It provides energy to prana and is responsible for developing willpower, determination and enthusiasm. Although these qualities are provided by food, it is the jatharagni (Gastric acid) that enables the food to be transformed into nutrients useful for the body. It is vital to maintain the balanced functioning of jatharagni, as all other agnis depend on this, as well as all the dhatus, in order to receive proper nourishment. If jatharagni is weak or defective, it is not able to digest food adequately. The ahara rasa produced will be poor in quality or quantity, or both. Therefore, the dhatus and ojas will not receive proper nourishment and will inevitably become unbalanced.



## The four states of Agni



Ayurveda classifies four different states of agni that point to certain constitutional tendencies. We each have digestive tendencies that can be regulated with appropriate diet and herbs.

1. Visham agni: Visamagni: This is an erratic and unstable agni state, arising due to the influence of vata. The functioning of agni is variable - the jatharagni sometimes digests food normally, and at other times slowly. This type of agni is often found in people with a vata dosha or when vata is aggravated. The people with this type of Agni are prone to have an irregular appetite and digestive system with signs of variable hunger. Symptoms constipation, distension or swelling of the abdomen, dysentery, colic type pain and wind, gas or gurgling sounds in the intestines.

2. Tikshna agni: The function of agni becomes too fast or strong in this state, which is due to an aggravation of pitta. It is often seen in people with a predominantly pitta constitution, or when pitta is disturbed. The jatharagni becomes hyperactive in the tikshagni state, and can digest even large quantities of food in a very short amount of time, leaving the person feeling constantly hungry.

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Symptoms of this state of agni include a dry mouth and palate, a burning sensation in the stomach and excessive thirst. **Tikshna agni:** Intense hunger but with poor digestion is a pitta sign. Also thirst, parched mouth, dry throat, loose stool, low blood sugar levels and a burning sensation in intestines. This is common in pitta body types who can be intense and irritable.

3. **Mandagni:** The agni begins to function at a minimal rate in this condition, which is often found in people with kapha aggravation or constitution. The jatharagni cannot digest even a small quantity of food. Symptoms including nausea, vomiting, heaviness in the stomach, laziness, coughing, coating of the tongue and excessive salivation may be experienced when agni is in this condition. This means slow digestion and is commonly a kapha sign. Also weak hunger, heaviness after a meal, tiredness after eating, sluggish bowels, bulky stool, feeling cold, sweet craving, stimulant craving. Use pungent and bitter flavours.

4. **Samagni:** The functioning of agni is normal and stable in this state, indicative of the balanced state of the three doshas in the body. Jatharagni can easily digest the normal diet and extract proper nourishment. All the tissues or dhatus, cells and organs receive sufficient nutrition, and good health is maintained. Balanced hunger and digestion; food is digested within 4 hours with no excess craving or lack of interest in food.

### Effects of low digestive fire



All forms of imbalanced agni create ama. This is undigested food that forms toxins that act as poisons to the body. In chronic conditions ama can manifest as high cholesterol, blood disorders, fatigue syndromes, tumours, cysts, skin conditions. Ama causes the doshas to accumulate at their site; kapha in stomach, pitta in the abdomen, vata in the colon. If left untreated the accumulated doshas can become aggravated and start to overflow. - Kapha can become mucus, coughs, asthma, diabetes, obesity. - Pitta can become skin problems, heart problems, and inflammatory problems. Vata can become bone problems, nervous conditions, and degenerative conditions.

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# Ayurvedic Yoga therapy for digestion

## Ayurvedic Yoga Breathing Exercises for Digestive Health:

### -Agni Sara kriya: Increasing the digestive fire practice.

This is a simple and effective practice that helps to clear low digestive fire, gas, constipation as well as massaging the digestive organs and stimulating the appetite.

Sit in Vajrasana with your knees far apart.

Place the hands on your knees and, keeping the arms straight, lean forwards.

Open your mouth and stick your tongue out.

Breathe in and out of your mouth like a panting dog. Simultaneously expand and contract your whole abdomen.

Imagine that there is a balloon that is inflating and deflating within your belly and that each breath is fanning the digestive flames. Repeat this up to 25 times.

This practice takes a while to learn but is extremely important for cleaning the intestines and stimulating the digestive system. It is the most powerful of the agni enkindling practices. The liver, pancreas, stomach, small and large intestines all receive a wonderful massage encouraging them to regulate their function.

All breathing practices help digestion. Some, such as kapalabhati and bhastrika work by stimulating the whole system, others, such as nadi shodhana and brahmari work by relaxing any tension and freeing digestion from the trapping of stress.

### -Diaphragmatic or Control abdominal breathing technique this

breath stimulates peristalsis and relaxes the abdomen. It can be performed seated, laying down or standing.

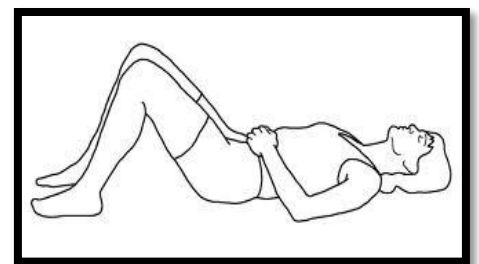
Lie on your back with your both knees bend and relax your whole body, place both hand on your abdomen above the navel.

Breathing in feel the abdomen moving up and allow the clavicles and thoracic region remain relaxed.

Breathe out slowly and completely, using the diaphragm, remember that it is the movement of the diaphragm which is responsible for abdominal breathing. As you breathing out notice that abdomen and navel moving down towards the spine.

Hold your breath out without any strains for a second or two.

Breathe in slowly and deeply from the diaphragm. Try not to expand the chest or move the clavicle.



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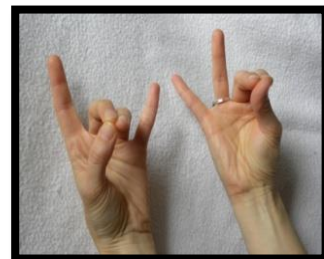
Feel that your abdomen is expanding and the navel rising up. Fill the lungs as much as you can without expanding the ribcage. Hold breath for a second and then with control exhale again, slowly and completely push all the air out of your lungs. Hold the breath out for a short time, and then inhale.

## Mudra beneficial for digestion

### Pushan mudra:

Right hand: The tips of the thumb, index finger, and middle finger are on top of each other; the other fingers are extended.

Left hand: The tips of the thumb, middle finger, and ring finger are on top of each other, the other fingers are extended. This mudra symbolizes accepting and receiving with the gesture of one hand and letting things flow, giving, and letting go with the gesture of the other. Both should be coordinated with each other in digestion. It influences the energy currents that are responsible for absorbing and utilizing food, as well as helping with elimination.



## Yoga asana (postures) sequence for digestion

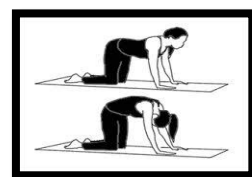
### 1-Seated twist or chair twist

Inhaling raise the arms at shoulder level, exhale twist into the right with left hand on the right knee and right hand behind you. Inhale return to the center position, exhale twist to the left side and place right hand on the left knee and left hand behind you. Inhale return back to the center then hold on each side for 2-6 breath.



### 2-Cat and dog

Inhaling into dog, exhale into cat using abdominal breathing with kumbhaka (retention) at the end of exhalation 2-3 seconds. Repeat x2- 6 rounds.



**3- Vyaghrasana** is an Indian translation for Tiger pose. This is called so as it simulates the stretching movement made by a tiger as it wakes up from deep sleep.



Inhale\_\_\_\_\_



Exhale\_\_\_

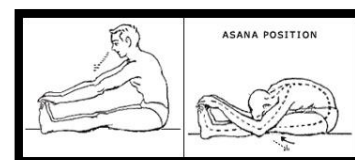
Repeat this x 1-4 rounds each side

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**8-Squat with Ashwini Mudra:** If the knees are injured or will simply not sustain a squat, gently sit back onto the buttocks, turn the feet out, bring the hands to the ankles and use the arms to encourage the groin to open.

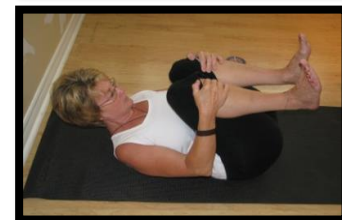


### 10-paschimottasana (full forward bending)



### 11-Knees to Chest

From a reclining position, gently bend the knees and bring the hands to the back of the thighs or in front to the shins. With an exhalation, draw them in towards the body and focus on the abdominal Breath, hold 2-6 breath.



### 12- Alligator twist:

Inhale both knees to center exhale twisting to the right and then hold for 5-8 breath, using abdominal breathing technique. Repeat on the other side.



13-Finishing with Savasana relaxation pose for at least 10 minutes

*Your body, which is bonding millions of molecules every second, depends on transformation. Breathing and digestion harness transformation. Food and air aren't just shuffled about but, rather, undergo the exact chemical bonding needed to keep you alive. The sugar extracted from an orange travels to the brain and fuels a thought. The emergent property in this case is the newness of the thought; no molecules in the history of the universe ever combined to produce that exact thought." [Deepak Chopra, The](#)*

*[Book of Secrets: Unlocking the Hidden dimensions of Your Life](#)*

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