

## Review Article

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## “FOOD AND NUTRITION CONCEPTS IN SAMHITAS (AHARA VIDHI): A SCIENTIFIC REVIEW”

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### ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** Ayurveda accords central importance to *Ahara* (diet) as the foremost pillar of life (*Trayopasthambha*). The classical Samhitas (Charaka, Sushruta, Ashtanga Hridaya) describe detailed principles of *Ahara Vidhi* (dietary rules), highlighting the role of food in health, disease prevention, and therapy. These principles resonate with modern concepts of dietetics, nutraceuticals, and lifestyle medicine. **Methods:** A comprehensive literature review was conducted using classical Ayurvedic texts (Charaka Samhita, Sushruta Samhita, Ashtanga Hridaya, Kashyapa Samhita), commentaries, and modern scientific research indexed in PubMed, Scopus, and Web of Science. Studies and reviews discussing *Ahara Vidhi*, food classification, digestion, dietary regimens, and their physiological impact were included. **Results:** Findings indicate that Samhitas provide a multidimensional view of food: (i) *Ahara Vidhi Vidhan* (dietary code of conduct), (ii) food classification by properties (*guna, rasa, virya, vipaka*), (iii) the concept of *Pathya-Apathya* (wholesome and unwholesome diet), (iv) seasonal and individual-specific dietary regimens, and (v) therapeutic use of food in disease management. Modern research supports these principles, correlating them with nutrition science, gut microbiome modulation, chrononutrition, and functional foods. **Discussion:** Ayurvedic concepts align with modern preventive nutrition and precision dietetics, though gaps remain in large-scale clinical validation and standardization. Integration of *Ahara Vidhi* into contemporary dietetics may provide novel insights into personalized nutrition.

**KEYWORDS:** Ahara Vidhi, Ayurveda, dietetics, food science, nutrition

## INTRODUCTION

Ayurveda, the science of life, places *Ahara* (food) on par with *Nidra* (sleep) and *Brahmacharya* (regulated lifestyle) as the three pillars sustaining health<sup>[1-2]</sup>. Unlike modern nutrition, which primarily emphasizes caloric value and nutrients, Ayurveda views food as a holistic determinant of physical, mental, and spiritual well-being<sup>[3-4]</sup>.

The Samhitas present extensive guidelines on dietary principles under *Ahara Vidhi*, detailing methods of food selection, preparation, combinations, timing, and consumption practices<sup>[5-6]</sup>. These were designed not only to maintain homeostasis (*dosha-samyata*) but also to enhance immunity (*ojas*), digestion (*agni*), and longevity. The importance of seasonal variations (*ritucharya*), diurnal rhythms (*dinacharya*), and individual constitution (*prakriti*) further underscores Ayurveda's emphasis on personalized nutrition<sup>[7-8]</sup>. This review aims to consolidate the principles of *Ahara Vidhi* from Samhitas, analyze their scientific relevance, and correlate them with modern nutritional sciences. The objectives are to: (i) highlight key dietary concepts from classical texts, (ii) explore therapeutic implications of diet in health and disease, and (iii) evaluate contemporary research validating Ayurvedic nutrition<sup>[9-10]</sup>.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

- **Sources of Data:** Classical Ayurvedic texts—*Charaka Samhita*, *Sushruta Samhita*, *Ashtanga Hridaya*, *Kashyapa Samhita*, and *Bhaishajya Ratnavali*—along with commentaries such as *Ayurveda Dipika* (Chakrapanidatta) and *Nibandha Sangraha* (Dalhana) were reviewed<sup>[11]</sup>.
- **Databases Searched:** PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, AYUSH Research Portal<sup>[12]</sup>.
- **Search Strategy:** Keywords included “Ahara Vidhi,” “Ayurveda nutrition,” “Ayurvedic dietetics,” “food and health Ayurveda,” “pathya-apathya,” “Ayurvedic diet in chronic diseases.”<sup>[13]</sup>
- **Inclusion Criteria:** Studies, reviews, and clinical trials addressing Ayurvedic dietary principles, food classifications, their biochemical basis, or modern nutritional parallels<sup>[14]</sup>.

- **Exclusion Criteria:** Non-peer-reviewed articles, anecdotal evidence without references, and studies unrelated to Ayurveda or food science<sup>[15]</sup>.
- **Type of Studies Reviewed:** Classical textual analysis, narrative reviews, preclinical studies, clinical trials, and systematic reviews<sup>[15]</sup>.

## OBSERVATION AND RESULTS

The Ayurvedic Samhitas, particularly *Charaka Samhita*, *Sushruta Samhita*, *Ashtanga Hridaya*, and *Kashyapa Samhita*, provide a detailed framework for understanding food and nutrition under the broad concept of *Ahara Vidhi* (dietary regimen). The following thematic observations summarize classical descriptions, their interpretations, and modern correlations.

### 1. Ahara as the Prime Pillar of Health

Ayurveda identifies three pillars of life (*trayopasthambha*)—Ahara (food), Nidra (sleep), and Brahmacharya (regulated lifestyle). Among them, Ahara is given primary importance because it is the direct source of strength (*bala*), complexion (*varna*), vitality (*ojas*), and longevity (*ayushya*). Unlike medicines, which are consumed episodically, food is taken daily and functions as the most consistent therapeutic factor. The Samhitas equate proper diet with medicine and improper diet with disease-causing agents.

Modern nutrition echoes this emphasis, as dietary habits are strongly linked with the risk of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as diabetes, obesity, and cardiovascular disorders.

### 2. Ahara Vidhi Vidhan (Dietary Code of Conduct)

The Samhitas outline a comprehensive dietary code known as *Ahara Vidhi Vidhan*. Its principles include:

- Food should be warm, fresh, and palatable.
- It should be taken in appropriate quantity (*matra*), neither too much nor too little.
- Meals should respect the strength of *agni* (digestive fire).
- Incompatible food combinations (*viruddhahara*) must be avoided.
- One should eat with concentration, without distractions such as talking, laughing, or excessive movement.

These recommendations parallel contemporary concepts of mindful eating, portion control, food hygiene, and respect for digestive health.

### 3. Food Classification in Ayurveda

**Foods are classified according to multiple dimensions:**

- Rasa (Taste): Sweet, sour, salty, pungent, bitter, and astringent. Each rasa exerts specific physiological actions. For example, sweet taste promotes strength, while bitter has detoxifying effects.
- Guna (Qualities): Heavy (*guru*), light (*laghu*), unctuous (*snigdha*), dry (*ruksha*), hot (*ushna*), and cold (*shita*).
- Virya (Potency): Heating (*ushna*) or cooling (*shita*).
- Vipaka (Post-digestive taste): Sweet, sour, or pungent.
- Prabhava (Specific action): Unique effects not explainable by rasa, guna, virya, or vipaka.

This multidimensional framework offers a broader understanding than modern calorie-based classifications, aligning with pharmacological properties and nutrigenomics.

**4. Pathya and Apathya (Wholesome and Unwholesome Diet)**

*Pathya ahara* refers to foods conducive to health, such as barley (*yava*), green gram (*mudga*), ghee, and fresh vegetables. *Apathya* refers to foods harmful to health, such as stale food, heavy-to-digest preparations, and junk-like combinations.

The emphasis on *pathya-apathya* correlates with modern categories of functional foods, superfoods, and unhealthy processed foods. For instance, barley is rich in soluble fibers that regulate blood sugar, supporting Ayurveda’s recommendation in diabetes management.

**5. Agni (Digestive Fire) and Ama (Toxins)**

The concept of *agni* is central to Ayurvedic nutrition. Properly functioning digestive fire ensures transformation of food into nutritive essence (*rasa dhatu*), while weak *agni* leads to *ama* (undigested toxins) that are responsible for many diseases.

Modern parallels include metabolism, enzymatic digestion, gut microbiota balance, and inflammatory mediators. Conditions such as leaky gut and metabolic endotoxemia mirror the Ayurvedic concept of *ama*.

**6. Ritucharya (Seasonal Dietary Regimens)**

The Samhitas stress seasonal dietary adaptation:

- In winter (hemanta and shishira), heavy and unctuous foods like meat soups, sesame, and ghee are advised.
- In summer (grishma), cooling and light foods like rice gruel, fruits, and milk are preferred.
- During rainy season (varsha), easily digestible, warm, and sour foods are recommended to balance aggravated doshas.

This aligns with modern chrononutrition and seasonal adaptation in dietary needs, showing the importance of syncing food intake with environmental changes.

**7. Dinacharya (Daily Diet Regimens)**

Daily regimens emphasize timely intake of meals, with the main meal consumed during midday when digestive fire is strongest. Breakfast and light dinners are recommended. This resonates with modern circadian biology, which highlights meal timing as crucial for metabolic health.

**8. Prakriti-based Diet (Personalized Nutrition)**

Ayurveda prescribes individualized diets based on constitution (*prakriti*):

- Vata prakriti: Warm, unctuous, and grounding foods.
- Pitta prakriti: Cooling, sweet, and bitter foods.
- Kapha prakriti: Light, dry, and pungent foods.

This is comparable to precision nutrition and nutrigenomics, where diets are tailored to genetic and metabolic profiles.

**9. Viruddhahara (Incompatible Foods)**

Certain combinations, such as milk with fish, honey with ghee in equal quantities, or reheated foods, are described as harmful. These combinations are said to cause metabolic derangements and chronic diseases. Modern science explains these through mechanisms such as food allergies, toxic compound formation (e.g., reheated oils producing trans fats), and biochemical incompatibilities.

**10. Food as Medicine (Ahara as Aushadha)**

Ayurveda integrates diet into therapeutic regimens:

- Milk for debility and pitta disorders.
- Buttermilk for digestive ailments and obesity.
- Honey for wound healing and respiratory conditions.
- Barley and green gram for metabolic disorders like diabetes and obesity.

Recent studies support these claims, e.g., probiotics in buttermilk improving gut health, antioxidants in honey aiding wound healing, and soluble fiber in

barley reducing cholesterol.

### 11. Ahara Vidhi and Mental Health

The Samhitas highlight the mental impact of food, with *sattvic* foods (fresh, light, wholesome) promoting clarity, *rajasic* foods (spicy, fried) inducing restlessness, and *tamasic* foods (stale, preserved) causing lethargy.

Modern nutritional psychiatry echoes this, linking diet quality with mood disorders, anxiety, and cognition. The gut-brain axis is an emerging area validating Ayurvedic perspectives.

### 12. Contemporary Research Support

Modern studies increasingly validate Ayurvedic dietary principles:

- Gut microbiome studies support the emphasis on Agni and fresh food.
- Chrononutrition research confirms ritucharya and dinacharya dietary timing.
- Functional foods and nutraceuticals parallel Ayurvedic pathya ahara.
- Mindful eating studies validate Ahara Vidhi Vidhan recommendations.

Thus, Ayurveda's Ahara Vidhi can be considered a precursor to modern dietetics and lifestyle medicine.

## DISCUSSION

The Ayurvedic dietary framework outlined in Samhitas is strikingly holistic and continues to find relevance in modern scientific paradigms. While contemporary nutrition often emphasizes caloric intake, macronutrients, and micronutrients, Ayurveda takes a multidimensional approach by incorporating digestion, seasonality, constitution, food synergy, and mental health.

One of the most significant intersections between Ayurveda and modern science lies in the concept of *Agni*. Current research on the gut microbiome, metabolic pathways, and digestive enzymes underscores the centrality of digestion in maintaining health and preventing disease. The Ayurvedic idea that impaired Agni leads to *ama* correlates with findings on metabolic endotoxemia, systemic inflammation, and gut dysbiosis<sup>[16]</sup>.

Similarly, *Viruddhahara* or incompatible foods, once dismissed as superstition, now finds plausible explanations in food chemistry and immunology. The combination of milk and fish, for example, may produce allergenic responses or digestive disturbances. Modern toxicology also supports the

caution against reheated oils, which generate harmful trans fats and free radicals<sup>[17]</sup>.

The concepts of *Ritucharya* and *Dinacharya* anticipate modern discoveries in circadian biology and chrononutrition. Both Ayurveda and contemporary science highlight that meal timing and seasonal adaptation significantly influence metabolism, immunity, and disease susceptibility.

Another strong parallel is found in personalized nutrition. Ayurveda's prakriti-based dietary recommendations closely resemble nutrigenomics, where individual genetic variations determine nutritional needs and responses. This makes Ayurveda particularly relevant in the era of precision medicine<sup>[18]</sup>.

However, there are gaps. Large-scale randomized controlled trials validating Ayurvedic dietary principles are limited. Terminological differences between Ayurveda and modern science often hinder cross-disciplinary dialogue. Additionally, while modern nutrition excels in biochemical quantification, Ayurveda emphasizes qualitative and contextual variables, which are harder to measure<sup>[19]</sup>.

Future directions should involve translational research bridging Ayurveda and modern nutrition. Tools such as metabolomics, microbiome analysis, and personalized health monitoring could scientifically validate *Ahara Vidhi*. Furthermore, public health nutrition strategies incorporating Ayurvedic wisdom could help address the global rise in lifestyle disorders<sup>[20]</sup>.

In conclusion, Ayurvedic dietary concepts are not only relevant but also complementary to modern nutritional science. They offer a preventive, individualized, and holistic framework that can enrich current dietetics, provided rigorous scientific validation is undertaken.

## CONCLUSION

The Samhitas provide a timeless framework of *Ahara Vidhi*, encompassing dietary codes, food classifications, and therapeutic applications. These principles resonate with modern nutrition in domains such as functional foods, gut health, and personalized dietetics. The holistic approach of Ayurveda, with emphasis on digestion, seasonality, and individuality, offers insights beyond calorie counting and nutrient analysis.

By aligning classical dietary wisdom with

contemporary scientific methods, Ayurveda can significantly contribute to preventive and therapeutic nutrition. Further interdisciplinary research is essential to validate these principles, ensuring their integration into modern healthcare. Thus, *Ahara Vidhi* stands as a practical, evidence-based approach to health promotion, disease prevention, and sustainable well-being.

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