

# Preventive Medicine, Stress and Ayurveda

In this age of modern medicine, preventive medicine has become a well-respected concept. Over the last 20 years, the general public and the allopathic establishment have evolved to a place of recognizing the importance of prevention.

Prior to the mid 1970's, the term, "preventive medicine" was rarely heard in traditional circles. The concept was relegated to a small subculture of free-thinking individuals who were into "organic living." Eventually the wisdom of this simple philosophy could not be denied. Quickly interest grew and preventive medicine entered the mainstream. More and more articles appeared in magazines such as Time, Prevention, and Newsweek, and numerous best-selling books appeared on the market, each claiming to keep an individual eternally healthy through proper health practices, including diet, vitamins, and other substances like apple cider vinegar.

One of the pioneers in preventive medicine was a medical researcher named Hans Selye, who rocked the traditional medical establishment with his book, *The Stress of Life*. Published in the 1950's, this book by Selye charted the body's reactions to stress and was able to produce a model for stress as an important, overlooked cause of disease. His research was well documented and established that stress fatigues the body's physiological homeostatic mechanisms causing the body to malfunction and create disease. He implicated arthritis, cancer and connective tissue disorders (i.e. fibromyalgia, Lupus, etc.) as stress responses by the body. This naturally challenged the medical approach of looking for pathogenic organisms as the cause and drug treatment as the cure. Mr. Selye did not suggest treatment--he simply addressed the effect of stress. Since then, many ideas have emerged on how to keep the damaging effects of stress from affecting our lives.

Preventive medicine implies doing something to prevent disease and has taken four different and distinct directions. First, early detection has been well promoted by the mainstream medical community. Women are recommended to have routine mammograms, and both men and women are recommended to have periodic colonoscopies as a means of detecting early cancers. While this does not really prevent disease, it does lead to early detection, and thus to better treatment results.

The second concept involves preventing the effects of stress from harming us. This has led to the use of a wide assortment of nutritional products, including stress vitamins (mostly B-vitamins), antioxidants (which decrease cellular destruction and aging), micro nutrient support (kelp, Blue Green Algae) and other nutrient support. This approach has created a new multibillion-dollar industry intent upon selling the public the idea that the only way to stay healthy is to take these products. There is merit to this approach and certainly, to some degree, these products do work; but their effectiveness is limited.

The third method involves purifying our bodies as a way of keeping environmental poisons (pesticides, heavy metals, industrial chemicals, hormones, etc.) from harming us. This has led to the expansion of the organic health food and water purification industries. In addition, many new products are on the market to help us remove toxins from our bodies. Most of these are herbal alteratives (blood and liver purifiers) and purgatives or laxatives to cleanse the colon. Pancha Karma<sup>[1]</sup>, the Ayurvedic science of purification also addresses these toxins, as well as toxins created internally through the poor digestion of food.

The fourth method, although probably the least favorite of society as a whole, is perhaps the most important of all. It involves looking at our lifestyle and recognizing how our choices about how we live and act are producing stress, which is slowly killing us. This subject takes the discussion away from how to manage stress and enters into the subject of how to prevent it. Of course, some stress is a part of being alive. As Hans Selye points out, without it our bodies could not grow stronger. Stress challenges our bodies. If we rise to the challenge, we usually become stronger as a result. So, while it may not be practical to remove all stress from our lives, much of it is self-generated and therefore

unnecessary. It is on this subject that Ayurveda<sup>i[2]</sup> speaks most directly.

Ayurveda is the science of producing harmony in our lives. In Ayurveda we say that where there is harmony, there is health; where there is disharmony, there is disease. The term harmony in this context means creating a harmonious relationship with our environment through our five senses. Exposing ourselves to harmonious tastes (foods and herbs), sights (colors and beauty), smells (aromatherapy), sounds (music and mantra), and touch (massage and oils) creates a state of harmony within our bodies. This state of harmony prevents disease.

Ayurveda looks at the growth of disease as one would look at the growth of a tree. With no disrespect to our tree friends, this is just an analogy. There is a seed which sprouts and develops roots. The stalk grows and the trunk thickens. Branches spread and leaves grow. Most of what we call disease or symptoms are the leaves. They are distant from their origin or roots. Most treatments for disease, allopathic or herbal, are like trimming back the leaves. Some go deeper to the branches, and some cut down the tree all together. But what about the roots? With its roots intact, a hearty, persistent tree grows back, and the weary gardener has to keep pruning and pruning.

The seed, or root of all disease, from an Ayurvedic perspective, is the disharmony of our actions. Eating improper foods, listening to disharmonious music, etc. can produce direct physical stress. A weakened body cannot tolerate continued stress and crumbles into the darkness of disease.

Not only does Ayurveda discuss physical stressors, but also those of the more subtle emotions. Mental disease can also be looked at as the same tree. The leaves far distant from the roots are serious diseases such as psychosis and schizophrenia. The closer branches are the milder conditions like panic anxiety, and the still closer conditions of the trunk, mild diseases like anger, worry, grief and attachment. At the root, Ayurveda sees a person as having forgotten their own true nature as spirit or as the part of themselves connected to God. Ayurveda sees God as that which connects us all together. When we forget, as we so often do, we act as if we are separate from one another. This sense of separation is at the root of emotional challenges. Understanding this, Ayurveda utilizes meditation and yoga as a path to quiet our inner chatter and dialogue. In the stillness created, a person perceives the truth of their existence and all emotions are transcended. In comparison to the truth, we could say our emotions seem insignificant and our attachment to them rather humorous.

In the area of disease prevention, Ayurveda teaches us that through a healthy lifestyle that is individually designed to be harmonious with our own unique nature (our constitution<sup>i[3]</sup>), and the practices of meditation and yoga, a person can reach their potential physically, emotionally and spiritually. In this state, disease does not exist. It serves no purpose. For what is disease, really? It is our body communicating disharmony. Remove the disharmony and you remove the disease.

Preventive medicine is an exciting step forward on our journey to live without disease. As the journey continues to unfold, we will find that it parallels our journey to enlightenment or the perfecting of our nature. Early detection of disease, reducing the effects of stress, and purifying our bodies are important steps on our journey toward keeping ourselves healthy. Our lifestyle choices reflect our deepest natures, and as we change, so does our health. Namaste.

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### Links:

[1] <http://www.ayurvedacollege.com/glossary/term/11>

[2] <http://www.ayurvedacollege.com/glossary/term/10>

[3] <http://www.ayurvedacollege.com/glossary/term/15>