

Health at Every Age

All of life flows like the seasons, a perpetual cycle where what is normal (healthy) today flows into what is normal (healthy) for tomorrow. Health is not a static way of being but a dynamic flowing expression of optimal well being.

Early in our life, from birth to puberty, our bodies are growing rapidly. Our physiology is designed for helping us to achieve a full grown, strong body. During this first phase of life, Ayurveda^[1] defines health as the formation of healthy tissues in the body. During this period the body needs foods that are deeply nourishing. These foods are heavy and contain an abundance of the earth element. Foods such as milk, nuts and grains are very important. These foods support the building of bodily tissue. Too much of these foods however leads to building too much tissue. These children become overweight. Hence, it is important that children learn not to overindulge. Rarely however, do high quality heavy foods cause children to become overweight. Rather, it is the heavy junk foods that are primarily responsible. Ice cream, candy other sweets, while rich in earth element are the culprits of weight gain. The earth element builds tissue. During childhood, it is important to choose healthy forms of the earth element to bring into body.

Ayurveda describes the second phase of life as the time of action and service. It is during this phase of life we begin to contribute to society. Having been properly nourished as a child, the body and mind are now capable of optimally performing. During this phase of life when the body stops growing until retirement (physiologically between age 50 ñ 70) health is defined as the capacity to perform service without obstruction. Hence, a healthy individual is not impaired. These people are able to fully express themselves without the limitations of a physical or psychological challenge. In order to be healthy at this age, a strong desire to be of service is important. In this way, a person is flowing with the rhythms of nature. In order to sustain the body, it is important to recognize that the body needs less food. As the body's tissues are no longer growing, less nourishment is required. During this phase of life, it is very important to take smaller portions during meals. A failure to do so will result in middle age weight gain. Since most people do find themselves over-eating during this stage, it is important to take in a greater amount of lighter but healthy foods. During this phase of life, the proportion of vegetables and fruits in the diet should increase.

The third and final phase of life is the time of reflection. During this phase of life, we have the opportunity to reflect on the life we have lived and what we have learned. If we are so fortunate, we will have the opportunity to share what we have learned with others playing the role of the elder teacher. Absent that opportunity, a person may spend time in meditation, contemplation and perform volunteer work assisting those who are still in their second phase of life. Grandparents may also help with the grandchildren freeing up the parents to perform other duties. Health in this phase of life is defined as having the capacity to reflect. During this phase of life, the body tissues are beginning to break down. This is natural. This is also a time of preparation for the final transition. To extend life, it is important to take in nourishing tissue supporting foods rich in the earth element. This is not for the purpose of growing new tissue but rather for sustaining what is already there and slowing down the aging process. It is natural for the appetite to dwindle during this phase. Hence, it is important to eat small amounts three to five times per day. Eating too much will result in weight gain and its associated health challenges. Eating too little will result in weight loss and quicken the deterioration and ultimate demise of the body.

According to Ayurveda, during the first phase of life we are most prone to mucousy conditions caused by taking in too many rich and junk foods. During the second phase of life we are most prone to the diseases of stress as we work hard to accomplish our goals. During the third phase of life, we are most prone to diseases of deterioration. These are hastened by living out of harmony during one's life.

The first phase of life is a time of learning. This is the ideal activity for children and society is

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generally in rhythm with this aspect of nature. This is not however the ideal time to push children too hard or too fast into service. Simply put, children should not work for money but rather for experience. It is best if the motivation to work comes from a desire to serve rather than to be rewarded. The child who is raised in harmony with nature's rhythm is best prepared to enter life's second phase.

The second phase of life is a time of service. This is the time when the young adult chooses a career. The well prepared child grows up healthy and energetic with a desire to be of service. Healthy young adults are motivated to express themselves in the world and in doing so contribute to the lives of others. The healthy young adult is ready and willing to work hard.

Some young adults are not yet ready. Some still require further preparation. By delaying entering into the workforce (service force), the young adult is attempting to stay in the first phase a life, a comfortable phase where they are taken care of. From an Ayurvedic perspective, this is symptomatic of an imbalance and is neither ideal nor healthy. However, the child who has not been properly prepared during the first phase benefits more from continued preparation than from entering into the work force when they are not ready.

The third phase of life is a time of reflection. If an elder is forced to work into their later years the consequence will be additional suffering. Working hard after the age of 65 is out of rhythm of nature. The time of reflection is delayed and there may be little time to teach and share what one has learned. A body that works hard into the later years will deteriorate faster. It is time for society to support our elders and provide for them at least the basic necessities to allow for reflection and sharing. In return, our elders become our teachers.

Ayurveda is a science of understanding nature's laws. They are not negotiable. If we live in harmony with nature, we reap the benefits of good health. If we do not, we suffer. The season of our life is just one of nature's laws. Those who live a life in rhythm with nature age gracefully, remain well, and have great peace of mind. Knowledge of nature's rhythms can help guide each of us to find satisfaction and health at every age.

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