

Food as Medicine: An Ayurvedic Perspective on Diet and Its Relevance to Functional Foods Proposed Article Type: Perspective / Commentary

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Abstract

The expression “food as medicine” is increasingly used in nutrition and integrative medicine, yet the underlying idea is not new. Ayurvedic medicine has long regarded ahara (food) as a foundation of health, prevention, and recovery. In this framework, the biological effect of food depends not only on its composition but also on its preparation, combination, quantity, timing, season, digestive capacity (agni), habituation, and constitutional pattern (prakriti), traditionally described through Vata, Pitta, and Kapha. Modern functional-food science similarly examines foods and food components that may provide physiological benefits beyond basic nutrition. The two frameworks overlap in their emphasis on prevention and the health-modifying properties of food, but they are not interchangeable. Ayurveda offers a person- and context-centered philosophy that can generate research questions, while modern nutrition science provides methods to evaluate composition, mechanism, bioavailability, dose, safety, and clinical outcomes. A respectful dialogue between these approaches may support culturally informed and scientifically responsible innovation in functional-food research.

Keywords: Ayurveda; Ahara; Food as medicine; Functional foods; Prakriti; Dosha; Personalized Nutrition; Agni

Introduction

“You are what you eat” is a familiar modern expression, but it captures only part of the Ayurvedic view of food. The phrase is not a direct quotation from the classical Ayurvedic texts. Nevertheless, it reflects an important principle within Ayurveda: food participates in the maintenance of the body, the development of tissues, and the balance between health and disease. Ayurveda would add an important qualification: health is influenced not only by what we eat, but by how well an individual can digest, assimilate, and utilize that food. In this sense, Ayurveda views food as more than a collection of nutrients or bioactive compounds; it considers eating to be a highly personalized process. The same food may not have the same physiological effect in every person. Its suitability may depend on an individual’s constitution (prakriti), current state of balance or imbalance (vikriti), digestive capacity (agni), age, season, activity level, and even the way the food is prepared, combined, and consumed. Thus, the Ayurvedic concept of “food as medicine” extends beyond selecting healthy foods. It involves tailoring the type, quantity, preparation, timing, and combinations of foods to the individual so that they can be properly digested, absorbed, and transformed into substances that support health. In this respect, Ayurveda presents food (ahara) not simply as something to eat, but as part of a personalized approach to maintaining health, preventing disease, and supporting therapeutic care.

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Ahara as a foundation of health

In the Charaka Samhita, ahara is identified as one of the three supporting pillars of life, together with sleep and regulated conduct [1]. This places diet within the basic structure of daily health rather than treating it as an optional addition to medical care. Ayurvedic literature also uses the concept of pathya, meaning food and behavior that are wholesome, suitable, and supportive of recovery, and apathya for that which is unsuitable or potentially disruptive [2,3]. Some later Ayurvedic traditions, particularly discussions attributed to the Kashyapa Samhita, describe food as mahabhaishajya, or the “great medicine.” The importance of this expression lies in the recognition that food is not an occasional intervention but something that interacts with the body every day throughout life. Unlike a medicine that may be taken for a limited period to treat a specific illness, food is consumed continuously and therefore has the potential to influence health gradually and cumulatively.

In this context, describing food as “great medicine” does not mean that food can replace appropriate medical treatment or that every disease can be treated through diet alone. Rather, it emphasizes the foundational role of diet in maintaining physiological balance, supporting normal bodily functions, nourishing tissues, and helping preserve health over time. From the Ayurvedic perspective, food can contribute either positively or negatively depending on whether it is appropriate for the individual, properly prepared, consumed in suitable quantities and combinations, and adequately digested. Thus, the medicinal importance attributed to food in Ayurveda is closely connected to prevention as well as health maintenance. Appropriate dietary practices may help create conditions that support resilience and normal function, whereas unsuitable dietary habits, particularly when repeated over long periods, may contribute to imbalance and increase susceptibility to disease. Food therefore occupies a unique position in Ayurvedic thought: it is simultaneously a source of nourishment, part of everyday living, and an important means through which health can be supported before disease becomes established.

This concept also helps distinguish the Ayurvedic idea of “food as medicine” from the simple suggestion that certain foods contain medicinal compounds. Ayurveda places emphasis not only on the biological properties of the food itself, but also on the interaction between the food and the individual consuming it. In this sense, the therapeutic or preventive value of food depends on the person, digestive capacity, preparation, timing, quantity, and context in which it is consumed. Food becomes part of an ongoing, personalized approach to preserving health rather than merely a substance eaten for calories or nutrients.

Beyond the food itself: Digestion, context, and the individual

A distinctive feature of Ayurvedic dietetics is that the effect of a food is not considered fixed. Classical discussions evaluate the nature of the food, processing, combinations, quantity, place, season or timing, method of consumption, and the person consuming it [1,4]. Digestive and metabolic capacity, described

through the concept of agni, is central to this reasoning. The same food may be appropriate in one circumstance but less suitable in another because of differences in preparation, dose, digestive capacity, health status, age, climate, or habitual diet. Ayurveda also considers satmya, or individual adaptation and habituation, when judging dietary suitability [3-5]. Prakriti and satmya resemble aspects of modern personalized nutrition, but direct equivalence should not be assumed. Contemporary genetics, metabolomics, microbiome science, and clinical nutrition use different methods and standards of evidence, and current tools for assessing prakriti remain incompletely standardized and validated [5,6]. Still, both approaches challenge the idea that the same dietary recommendation will have the same effect in every person; in other words, the same diet may affect different individuals in different ways.

Within Ayurveda, this individualized approach is organized through prakriti, an individual's relatively stable constitutional pattern. Prakriti is traditionally described according to the relative predominance of three doshas-Vata, Pitta, and Kapha-and may include physical, physiological, and psychological tendencies. The doshas should not be reduced to fixed personality labels, and most individuals are understood to have a mixed constitution. Rather, they provide a traditional framework for considering why people may differ in digestion, appetite, tolerance of heat or cold, food preferences, and responses to diet [4-6]. Traditional dietary guidance uses the principle that similar qualities increase one another, and contrasting qualities may help restore balance. A Vata-predominant pattern, linked with light, dry, and cold qualities, is generally supported by warm, cooked, and moist foods. A Pitta-predominant pattern, linked with heat and sharpness, is traditionally balanced with cooling foods and moderation of pungent, acidic, or salty items. A Kapha-predominant pattern, linked with heaviness and stability, is generally supported by lighter, warming foods and pungent, bitter, or astringent tastes [4,5]. These are traditional concepts, not clinically validated prescriptions, but they illustrate an early model of individualized nutrition.

Connection to functional foods

Modern definitions generally describe functional foods as whole, fortified, enriched, or enhanced foods that may provide beneficial physiological effects beyond basic nutrition when consumed regularly at effective and safe levels [7-9]. This concept has a clear philosophical connection to the Ayurvedic view that food can influence physiological function, resilience, and disease risk. Both approaches move beyond a narrow understanding of food as a source of calories and essential nutrients. However, functional-food science and Ayurvedic food philosophy are not the same. Functional-food research commonly begins with a food, nutrient, phytochemical, probiotic, or other bioactive component and asks whether it produces a measurable benefit. Ayurveda begins with a wider relationship among the food, the eater, digestive capacity, preparation, timing, environment, and health condition. In modern terms, Ayurveda is closer to a systems-oriented dietary framework, whereas functional-food science often focuses on defined components, mechanisms, biomarkers, and outcomes.

From traditional knowledge to scientific evidence

Ayurvedic dietary knowledge may help identify foods, combinations, preparation methods, and patterns worthy of scientific study. It can contribute historical experience and culturally meaningful hypotheses, particularly in areas such as metabolic health, inflammation, healthy aging, and cancer prevention. Traditional use, however, is not proof of efficacy. Each proposed benefit should be examined through compositional analysis, mechanistic studies, bioavailability assessment, dose-response testing, toxicology, food-drug interaction studies, and appropriately designed human research [7-10]. This research should also preserve the context of the traditional recommendation. Studying an isolated compound may be useful, but it may not represent the effect of the whole food, culinary preparation, or dietary pattern. Conversely, traditional terminology should not be forced into one-to-one biomedical equivalents when the evidence does not support such a translation. The most productive approach is a two-way dialogue: Ayurveda can generate questions and broaden the variables considered, while modern science can test those questions with transparent and reproducible methods [4,5].

Conclusion

The modern concept of functional foods provides a scientific framework for examining a long-standing observation: food does more than provide calories and essential nutrients. Certain foods and food-derived components may influence physiological processes, metabolic pathways, inflammation, oxidative stress, and other mechanisms relevant to health and disease prevention. Ayurveda approaches this broader role of food from a different perspective, emphasizing not only the properties of the food itself, but also how food is prepared, combined, timed, consumed, digested, and ultimately tolerated by the individual. From this perspective, the health effects of food cannot always be understood solely by examining its nutrient or bioactive-compound content. The response may also depend on characteristics of the individual, including digestive capacity, constitution, age, current health status, activity level, and environmental or seasonal influences. In modern terminology, some of these ideas overlap with the growing recognition that nutritional responses vary among individuals because of differences in metabolism, genetics, the gut microbiome, lifestyle, and other biological and environmental factors.

The Ayurvedic message is therefore more nuanced than the familiar phrase “you are what you eat.” A more complete contemporary interpretation might be: we are influenced by what we eat, how we prepare and consume it, what we are able to digest and assimilate, and how that food interacts with our individual biology and environment. This does not mean that traditional Ayurvedic concepts and modern nutritional science are

equivalent. Rather, they share an important recognition that the biological effects of food are influenced by both the food itself and the person consuming it. Bringing this individualized perspective into dialogue with rigorous functional-food and nutritional research may help support preventive nutrition strategies that are evidence-based, biologically informed, culturally sensitive, and responsive to individual variation. A companion narrative review, *Functional Foods and Cancer Prevention: Molecular Mechanisms, Clinical Evidence, and Future Perspectives*, examines in greater depth the molecular mechanisms, clinical evidence, and potential role of functional foods in cancer prevention. Ultimately, viewing food through both its biological properties and its interaction with the individual may offer a broader framework for understanding its role in health promotion, disease prevention, and the continuing development of personalized nutrition.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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