

Stay in Touch With...Ayurveda, Part I

By Karyn Chabot

"Stay in Touch With..." is a periodic column designed to provide an overview of a particular technique or modality. If you would like to contribute to this column, please e-mail editorial@massagetoday.com.

When I was a student of Dr.

Vasant Lad at The Ayurvedic Institute in Albuquerque, New Mexico, each class left me in awe as I learned more about the ancient, profoundly simple, biological and spiritual science of Ayurveda.

In the past, Ayurveda has been misunderstood, but now with the yoga craze, people are starting to see that it is a beautiful medical science that encourages people to live in harmony with the earth, the elements and the seasons. Ayurveda does not involve mandatory worship of mysterious deities. Instead, it embraces all forms of spirituality and recognizes the divine intelligence within all living things. It is the ancient healing science of India.

Ayurveda addresses the root of disease, rather than just alleviate symptoms. It doesn't assign a medical name to disease because when you name something, you indirectly assign power to it. Instead, Ayurveda views disease as an imbalance of the five great elements within the body. Some of the modalities used to restore this fragile balance include nutritional and lifestyle changes, bodywork, herbs, yoga, meditation, mantra, mindfulness, breath work, sound, color, crystal, aromatherapy and intuitive living. This ancient science was designed to empower people with the knowledge of self-discovery and self-healing.

Disease starts in the mind with thought. By cultivating the garden of your mind and generating positive thoughts, you can prevent disease. A thought is absorbed and assimilated into the body, just like food, right down to the smallest structure of the human cell. An Ayurvedic practitioner named Ryan Kurczak, LMT, once told me: "Many of the people I know who succeed in utilizing Ayurveda as an effective method of

health maintenance implement moderate changes over a long period of time. They are not fanatics and don't get bent out of shape if someone offers them a piece of chocolate cake when they are supposed to be on a 'pure' Ayurvedic diet. When I asked my spiritual teacher about how strict I need to be with Ayurveda he said, 'Meditate, and be happy. Then adjust your diet as you need to.' One of the most powerful disease causing factors according to Ayurveda is a diseased mind. When the mind is peaceful, the body will be, as well."

We are the subatomic structure of God; we are microcosms of the macrocosmic universe. There are five great elements that exist on our planet: ether, air, fire, earth and water. Ayurveda classifies these five elements into three aspects. These aspects are referred to as doshas, a Sanskrit word meaning "biological principle," which generally refers to an imbalance due to excess of one of the elements within the body.

Although there are five great elements, there are only three doshas or biological principles. All five elements must exist within our bodies and within the universe in order for us to function properly. As soon as the sperm meets the egg, a unique combination of the five great elements is determined and the physical constitution is born. This constitution is called Prakruti.

Stress, negative thoughts, feeling disconnected from the divine within ourselves or the ones we love, wrong food choices, and lack of exercise are just some of the things that throw us out of balance. When the doshas are out of balance, it usually means they are in excess and have reached the first of six stages in the disease process called "accumulation." Restoring balance usually means reducing the dosha by making conscious choices regarding our lifestyle, food, mindfulness, exercise, breath, prayer, meditation and bodywork.

The three doshas are vata, pitta and kapha. Vata is a Sanskrit word meaning "what blows." Vata lives in the colon/large intestines and becomes excessive on cold, windy days during the fall and winter. When vata within the body is in excess, people tend to experience anxiety, panic attacks, insomnia, paranoia and loneliness.

Pitta means "what cooks" and lives in the small intestines. Pitta becomes excessive on hot summer days. When pitta within the body is excessive, people tend to experience self-condemnation, jealousy, anger, competitive thoughts, and aggression.

Kapha means "what sticks" and lives in the stomach. Kapha becomes excessive on cool, muddy days of spring and on cold, snowy days in the winter. When kapha within the body becomes excessive, people

experience greed, lethargy, apathy and heaviness. The weather, the seasons, our genetic constitution, lifestyle choices and our thoughts have a direct affect on our health.

After careful observation of the majority of my clients and friends, I have concluded that the most common complaints are stress and anxiety, which consequently disrupts vata within the body. Living in a world where we are eating lunch while we are driving our car, or reading our e-mail while listening to our voicemail at the same time will naturally disturb vata within the body and mind. Multitasking and feeling like there is not enough time in a day will continually challenge vata. When the vata dosha is out of balance within the body, it can blow the other doshas (pitta and kapha) out of balance causing an overflow of the other doshas. Preventing all the doshas from becoming excessive is important, but remember that vata is the dosha that is critical to health and longevity. The ancient Ayurvedic texts say the earth is now in the vata stage of its evolution, so vata is high for everyone simply because we are so connected to our earth.

There are specific bodywork techniques and lifestyle choices that pacify and calm the vata dosha. Massage therapists are at risk for having excessive vata because of the nature of the job. Most massage therapists will tell you they are in constant physical motion on some level during a session. Massage therapists are movement-centered, energetic, and on the go. Since vata is the dosha responsible for motion within the body and the universe, massage therapists need to take extra care not to accumulate too much vata. Massage therapy can become a vata-provoking job, so choose a lifestyle that will soothe and balance your vata. Here are some easy vata soothing activities:

- Eat your meals at the same time every day (or at least one meal).
- Plan your meals to avoid becoming anxious, cranky and hungry.
- Stay quiet during each massage session; be an active listener.
- Walk slowly, unless you are exercising. Walking more than two hours will irritate vata.
- Think positive thoughts and read daily affirmations.
- Avoid chatty people and long phone calls.
- Eat warm, unctuous foods, especially on cold, windy, dry days.
- Avoid scary movies.
- Avoid being in confused relationships.
- Stay warm.
- Go to bed at or before 10 p.m.

- Get a weekly massage with warm, organic, edible oil (sesame, sunflower or castor oil).
 - Give yourself a daily oil rubdown (abhyanga)
 - Surround yourself with soft things (pillows).
 - Avoid being late or rushed.
 - Avoid over-exercising.
 - Surround yourself with friends who make you laugh.
 - Adopt a personal daily restorative yoga routine and pranayama breathing.
 - Avoid carbonated beverages.
 - Avoid excessive mouth breathing while giving a massage. Instead, learn ujjayi breathing in and out of the nose.
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Editor's Note: Read part II of Karyn Chabot's article in the April 2005 issue.



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