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Ayurvedic cuisine- the road to immunity

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What we eat to build our immunity has taken centre-stage especially at a time when a raging pandemic has spread across the world. Does Ayurvedic cuisine have all the answers?

Many years ago, when health farms ruled the roost and the word “spa” had yet to slip into the average Indian’s lexicon, we checked into an Ayurvedic spa in south India. There, neither tea, coffee, salt nor spices were allowed and, at the end of seven days, we emerged caffeine and sodium-deprived, and ready to go on a binge – sip umpteen cups of coffee and tea and dump vats-full of salt in everything we ate.

Gone are the days when building immunity meant you had to walk down a torturous road of deprivation... surviving on lack-lustre salads and pallid dals. Today, Ayurvedic hospitals that employ the wisdom of Ayurveda, a 5000-year-old holistic Indian regimen, come in luxurious resort settings and the fare served incorporates the principles of Ayurvedic cuisine that is both wholesome and appetizing.

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Indeed, what we eat to build our immunity has taken centre-stage especially at a time when a raging pandemic is bringing the world to its knees. Diet and the digestive system or agni are crucial to building immunity and curing a person who is sick. "As per Ayurveda, immunity is a combination of good metabolism (good digestion or agni), quality liver functioning and balanced hormones," says Mumbai-based Dr Devina Kargutkar who has specialized in Ayurvedic diagnostics and medication and has worked with leading hospitals.



Ingredients of an Ayurvedic meal at Kalari Kovilakom

Image courtesy: ©Gustasp and Jerroo Irani

Generally, cold foods can dampen digestive fires or agni and make digestion lethargic. To stimulate a sluggish digestion, sip some ginger-lemon juice with a sprinkle of rock salt and a dash of honey. Warm blended soups on a cold winter day, light khichdi in summer and delicately spiced moong dal are easy to digest. So, make gut-loving food choices such as "wholesome legumes, seasonal fruits, fresh vegetables and nuts which strengthen agni and in turn build immunity. As for herbs and other immunity boosters, try to incorporate basil, garlic, turmeric, and amla (Indian gooseberry) regularly in your diet. Use ghee in at least one meal to boost immunity," advises Dr Kargutkar. "Avoid

chips, carbonated drinks, cookies, fast food as they have very little nutrient value,” she says.

“In Ayurveda, one’s immune system is boosted by Ojas, a fine vital energy present in the body,” reveals Gita Ramesh, managing director of the 30-villa Kairali Healing Village in Palakkad, Kerala, which is an Ayurvedic hospital in a 60-acre resort setting.” Fresh, seasonal organic food contains maximum natural vitamins. Unhealthy food and habits reduce the ability of cells to cope with all diseases including viral infections,” adds Ms Ramesh who is bio-chemist while her husband hails from a family of Allopathic doctors and Ayurvedic vaidis. Indeed, Ms Ramesh’s recipe book, *The Ayurvedic Cookbook*, brims with simple and quick recipes of classic Ayurvedic dishes with a contemporary slant, for anyone who wants “to live healthy and eat healthy.”



Apples boost immunity

Image courtesy: ©Gustasp and Jeroo Irani

Ms Ramesh reveals that green leafy vegetables like spinach, kale, and curly leaf cabbage boost a weak immune system. When stewed and spiced with immunity-stimulating spices, they become a power house of nutrients.

“Broccoli, cabbage and cauliflower contain a lot of antioxidants and flavonoids that stimulate immunity as do whole grains such as quinoa, amaranth, flax seeds” By way of fruits that are immunity-boosting, Ms Ramesh recommends apples and all sweet and juicy fruits such as pears, peaches, plums, pineapple, mangoes. “They transform themselves quickly into ojas, if they have ripened on the branches of their trees.”

“In Kerala, back in the day, Ayurveda was a part of the lifestyle of common people,” reminisces Ms Ramesh. “My mother never consulted a doctor! It was an era when a seasonal, vegetarian Ayurvedic-style diet was consumed at home. Illnesses were treated with medicinal herbs and immunity was built with regular oil massages. Much of this knowledge was lost in north India in the British era.” But it was in quiet, laidback Kerala that Ayurveda took root – undisturbed. Indeed, the state has always had traditional sanatoriums and hospitals practicing and teaching Ayurveda, strewn across the cool slopes of the Western Ghats. Even today, there are traditional practitioners in every village who draw their Ayurvedic knowledge from the ancient palm leaf scrolls handed down, over the generations, within families.

The concept of constitution (or prakriti) is at the heart of Ayurveda and this ancient Indian health regimen classifies human beings based on the predominant element within them – air, water, earth and fire. At an Ayurvedic hospital, various diagnostic methods (pulse rate, body type, etc) are used to determine which therapies and diet would be good for a particular constitutional type or dosha as it is called in Ayurveda. Incidentally, doshas mould a person’s mind, body and even the type of skin and hair.



Kairali Healing Village offers an Ayurvedic cooking class.

Image courtesy: ©Gustasp and Jeroo Irani

The basic principle of Ayurveda is to keep the doshas in balance and illness is the result of imbalance. Your dominant dosha is a combination of either- air and ether (vata type), of fire and water (pitta), or of earth and water (kapha). “Ayurveda cuisine is prepared on the basis of the doshas. So, it directly helps to improve the immune system,” says Dr Jouhar K, Chief Medical Officer at Kalari Kovilakom, an Ayurvedic treatment centre located in a former palace in Kollengode, Kerala, which bills itself as the Palace of Ayurveda. “A low fat and plant-based diet increases immunity.”

“Ayurvedic cuisine not only nourishes the body, it also nourishes the mind and soul,” reveals Dr Jouhar. “A relaxed and calm mind is recommended for optimal digestion. Chew food properly before swallowing and focus on eating. All the five senses should participate for proper assimilation of food and meal

times should be free of stress, anger, grief, etc as these may lead to indigestion and production of toxins.”

Ultimately, cooking should be a sensual experience, say Ayurvedic doctors, and the kitchen should be a place which stimulates all the five senses. When you cook, do it with love. Feel free to innovate even as you incorporate ancient Ayurvedic wisdom in every morsel and remember that the tongue and the taste buds are the gateway to good health and a happy spirit!

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