



Ayurvedic Dietetics in Mental Health: An Analytical Review

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ABSTRACT: According to the World Health Organization (WHO), mental illness has become increasingly prevalent over the last decade, with one in eight adults experiencing mental health issues each year. This rise has led to greater interest in the relationship between diet and mental health, giving rise to the emerging field of nutritional psychiatry. This discipline emphasizes how dietary choices, and nutritional intake can significantly impact mental well-being and aims to support the treatment of mental health conditions through specific dietary and lifestyle changes. In this way, Ayurvedic dietary guidelines can hold great relevance today for promoting mental health and overall well-being.

In Ayurveda, Ahara is recognized as a crucial aspect of health and is one of the three foundational pillars of the practice (Trayo-Upasthamba). The preventive and therapeutic principles of Ayurveda focus on Pathya Ahara and Vihara, which refer to a conducive diet and lifestyle regimen. Ayurveda provides comprehensive dietary guidelines, covering suitable food choices, compatible combinations, cooking methods, storage practices, dining environments, hygiene, and etiquette. A significant concept within Ayurveda is Viruddha Ahara, or food incompatibility, which is often cited as a primary cause of various mental disorders. The guidelines surrounding Pathya Ahara and Vihara address preventive, curative, and rehabilitative health aspects.

KEY WORDS: Mental Health, Ayurveda, Dietary Guidelines.

INTRODUCTION

Mental health disorders are not only a medical concern but a global crisis—affecting millions, reducing quality of life, and straining healthcare systems worldwide. Anxiety, depression, and stress-related conditions now rank among the top causes of disability, with the World Health Organization reporting over 280 million cases of depression alone. Factors influencing mental health are multifactorial, ranging from genetics and environment to lifestyle choices. While conventional treatments such as pharmacotherapy and psychotherapy despite their proven benefits are often constrained by side effects, accessibility issues, and high costs. These limitations have sparked growing interest in complementary and alternative solutions.

One such emerging field, nutritional psychiatry, explores how diet influences the onset and treatment of psychiatric disorders. Although this area of research is relatively new in modern medicine, Ayurveda—an ancient, evidence-informed medical system—outlined these connections thousands of years ago. Contemporary studies increasingly confirm Ayurveda's insights, particularly the gut–brain relationship, with the digestive system now recognized as the “second brain” due to its intrinsic neuronal networks.

This paper presents a systematic meta-analysis to evaluate the role of Ayurvedic dietary interventions in the prevention and management of mental health disorders.

Diet for Mental Health and Illness in Ayurveda: An Overview

“Annamayam hi soumya manah” is a popular quote from Chandogyopanishad, which means the mind is the essence of food we take. Diet is said to be basis of life, strength, complexion, Ojas, growth and development, perspicuity of Indriyas, happiness, clarity of voice, lustre, pleasure, increase of Dhatus, intellect, health etc. Since Vedic era, food has been given the prime importance.

It classifies food into Sattvika, Rajasika, and Tamasika, each influencing physical and mental health. Sattvika food—fresh, nutrient-rich, unctuous, and pleasing—promotes longevity, mental clarity, and emotional stability. Rajasika diets, characterized by excessive pungency, sourness, saltiness, heat, and dryness, can induce irritability and emotional imbalance, while Tamasika foods—stale, unhygienic, nutrient-deficient, or polluted—lead to dullness and mental lethargy. Continuous intake of non-Sattvika diets predisposes to psychiatric disorders such as Unmada and Apsmara. Classical guidelines like Ashtavidha Ahara Vidhi and Dwadasha Ashana Pravicharana emphasize not only food quality but also rules of consumption, underscoring diet’s preventive, causative, and therapeutic role in maintaining health, aiding recovery, and enhancing medicinal efficacy.

In modern science, numerous studies have shown that diet plays a critical role in brain function, cognition, and emotional well-being. Poor nutrition can exacerbate mental health disorders, while a well-balanced diet may reduce the risk of these conditions or alleviate symptoms in those already suffering. The gut-brain axis is a key mediator in this relationship. The gut and brain constantly communicate through the vagus nerve and other signaling pathways, and imbalances in gut health—such as inflammation or dysbiosis (imbalance in gut microbiota)—can negatively impact brain health and contribute to disorders like depression and anxiety.

METHODS

Search Strategy:

A comprehensive search of relevant literature was conducted across multiple databases along with Ayurvedic literature like *Brihatrayi* and *Laghutrayi*.

RESULTS

1. The concept of Ahara (Diet) in Ayurveda: Ayurveda states that all entities comprise the Pancha Mahabhootas—Earth (Prithvi), Water (Ap), Fire (Teja), Air (Vayu), and Ether (Akasha)—and that food’s elemental components nourish corresponding tissues. In Ayurveda, the harm from unwholesome food depends on factors such as locality, season, combination, potency, quantity, frequency, and the individual’s Dosha, Dhātu, and mental strength. Continuous intake saturates the body with vitiated Doshas, predisposing to physical and mental disorders. Etiological factors (Nidanas) for psychiatric illness include Aharaja, Viharaja, Manasika Bhava, and Agantuja, with diet and lifestyle playing equal roles.
2. **Ayurvedic dietary guidelines** -Ayurveda outlines precise dietary principles, including timely eating (Kale Bhojana), selecting foods suited to one’s constitution (Satmya, Hita Bhojana), and maintaining cleanliness (Suchi Bhojana). Meals should be unctuous (Snigdha), warm (Ushna), light (Laghu), mindful (Tanmanah), and incorporate all six tastes (Sad-Rasayukta Ahara), with sweetness predominating (Madhura Praya). Food is to be taken calmly (Na Ati Druta Vilambita), only when hungry (Kshudvan), preferably after bathing (Snatah) and washing (Dhauta Pada-Kara-Ananah),

preceded by prayers and offerings (Tarpana), and consumed respectfully (Anindan), in silence (Mauna).

3. **Ahara Matra (quantity of food)**- Ayurveda recognizes that dietary and nutritional needs vary according to factors such as Agni (digestive strength), Sharira Prakriti (body constitution), and age. Suśruta and Vāgbhata recommend that the stomach be proportionally filled with two parts solid food, one part liquid, and one part left empty to facilitate the unobstructed movement of Vata.
4. **Sequence of food intake**- Ayurveda advises beginning a meal with Guru, Madhura, and Snigdha foods, followed by Amla and Lavana, and ending with Ruksha, Katu, Tikta, and Kashaya items to optimize Agni and nutrient absorption. Post-meal, rest for about one Muhurta (~48 minutes) is recommended to support digestion.
5. **Ahara vidhi viseshaayatana** - To derive the full benefits of Ahara, Ayurveda prescribes knowledge of Vidhi Vishesha Ayatana, comprising eight factors. (1) Ahara Prakriti—the inherent nature of food (e.g., Guru, Laghu, Seeta, Ushna, Ruksha, Snigdha) and its effect on Agni; (2) Karana—modification of food properties through processing; (3) Samyoga—the impact of food combinations; (4) Rashi—appropriate quantity; (5) Desha—influence of habitat and origin; (6) Kaala—season, time of day, digestive phase, and disease stage; (7) Upayoga Samstha—rules of dietetics; and (8) Upayokta—characteristics and preferences of the consumer, including Okasatmya (habitual adaptation).
6. **Concept of Viruddhahara (Dietetic Incompatibility)**- Viruddhahara (dietetic incompatibility) is a distinctive Ayurvedic concept referring to foods or combinations that disturb dosha balance, disrupt normal physiological rhythms, and impair tissue metabolism. According to Charaka, such incompatibility may arise from wrong combinations, improper processing, unsuitable quantities, opposing qualities, inappropriate timing, or unsuitable seasonal intake—18 such types are described. Regular consumption can cause a wide range of disorders, including infertility, skin diseases, anaemia, gastrointestinal disorders, psychiatric conditions, and even death.
7. **Ritucharya (Seasonal regimen)**- In Ayurvedic classics, there has been a thorough consideration for seasons, besides the dietetic regimens for days and nights. Whole year is divided into six seasons and detailed regimen for these seasons is prescribed.
8. **Importance of Pathya -Apathya**-The Ahara which is beneficial and nutritional to the body and give the happiness to the mind is known as Pathya and opposite to that is known as Apathya. Wholesome food and regimen agreeable to mind and senses promote Tushti (mental satisfaction), Urja (mental strength) and Sukha(happiness) because of which disease gets diminished.

DISCUSSION

• Key Findings

From an Ayurvedic perspective, mental health disorders often arise from imbalanced Doshas, and one contributing factor is food incompatibility. Ayurvedic treatises provide comprehensive dietary guidelines that emphasize the importance of a balanced diet for maintaining health. Ayurveda advocates a holistic approach to diet, focusing on the quality, quantity, and method of food intake to promote optimal health.

- **Ritucharya**- 1.Spring (Vasanta): Kapha-pacifying bitter, hot, and astringent foods; avoid salty, sour, sweet. E.g. wheat, barley, honey, mango, jackfruit, forest meat.
- 2.Summer (Grishma): Cooling, liquid, sweet, unctuous foods for Pitta control; avoid hot, spicy, sour, salty. E.g. rice, milk, ghee, sugar, grapes, coconut water.
- 3.Rainy (Varsha): Warm, light, dry, fatty, sweet, sour, and salty foods for Vata balance. E.g. preserved rice, wheat, barley, mutton soup.

4.5.Pre-winter & Winter (Hemanta & Shishira): Hot, sweet, sour, salty Vataghna-Pittavardhaka diet. e.g. milk, sugarcane, rice, oils, fats.

6.Autumn (Sharad): Bitter, sweet, pungent cooling foods; ghee with bitter herbs; purgation/bloodletting for Pitta pacification.

- **Virudhahara-** The etiological factors of almost all Manorogas enlist Virudhahara as a major cause. A new branch called topography (a science related to combination of food) is emerging, which tells about the combination of basic categories of the food and their effects in the body.
- **Pathya Ahara-**Pathya Sevana (wholesome diet) is a key supportive pillar in disease management, prevention, and recurrence control. As per the dictum “Pathyam patho anapetam yadyachoktam manasa priyam”, recommended dietary items include:
 - 1.Sakavarga (Vegetables): Patola (Trichosanthes dioica), Brahmi (Bacopa monnieri), Shobhanjana (Moringa oleifera), Kakamaci (Solanum nigrum), Vastuka (Chenopodium album), Tanduliyaka (Amaranthus viridis).
 - 2.Dhanyavarga (Cereals/Pulses): Raktha/Aruna-Sali (red rice), Godhuma/Yava (wheat/barley), Mudga (green gram).
Phalavarga (Fruits): Draksha (grapes), Panasa (jackfruit), Matulunga (Citrus medica), Narikela (coconut), Kapittha (wood apple), Kusmanda (ash gourd), Dhatri (gooseberry), Haritaki (Terminalia chebula).
 3. Gorasavarga (Milk & Products): Ksira (milk), Navanita (butter), Ghrita (ghee).
 4. Paniyavarga (Beverages): Gangambu (rainwater), Madya (alcoholic preparations), Rasala, Kulmasatarpana (gruel of Kulmasa).
 - 5.Mutravarga (Medicinal Urine): Kharamutra (donkey urine), Ashvamutra (horse urine).
 6. Mamsavarga (Meat): Koorma mamsa (tortoise meat).
- **Apathya Ahara-** Apathya Ahara in Mental Illness the Apathyas mentioned in Unmada & Apasmara Prakarana of Yoga Ratnakara and Bhaishajya Ratnavali include, excess meat, fish, alcohol, sex, incompatible, heavy, hot, stale foods; suppression of natural urges; overexertion; excessive strain; certain bitter or leafy vegetables (e.g., bimbi); and acts violating ethical conduct. Charaka notes that individuals with strong minds, abstaining from meat and wine, consuming wholesome food, and maintaining internal–external cleanliness remain protected from both Nija and Agantuja Unmada.

This study provides observational evidence that Ayurvedic dietary interventions can significantly improve symptoms of mental health disorders. The findings are consistent with the Ayurvedic understanding that mental health is closely related to diet and lifestyle. WHO has highlighted the need for more preventive strategies, and this study contributes to that discourse by showing the effectiveness of an Ayurvedic approach to mental health.

- **Implications for Practice**

This study suggests that Ayurvedic dietary interventions may offer a complementary treatment approach for individuals with mental health disorders. Health practitioners, particularly those in integrative and holistic medicine, should consider the benefits of dietary recommendations based on Dosha constitution as part of a comprehensive treatment plan for mental health.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Ayurvedic dietary interventions show promising potential in the prevention and management of mental health disorders through logical use of medicines and modification of Ahara and Vihara to suit the needs of the person. The patient should be encouraged to follow proper dietary regimen, follow rules of Sadvrita, to use Medhya Rasayana (medicines that boost psyche) and Doshahara Ousadha (medicines) to

control the imbalanced mind. These findings support WHO's emphasis on preventive and holistic mental health strategies. Further research, including randomized controlled trials, is necessary to validate the efficacy of Ayurvedic dietary interventions and explore their role in long-term mental health management.

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