



Sweetness has an important place in an Ayurvedic diet as it is one of the six basic tastes: sweet, sour, salty, spicy, bitter and tart. According to Ayurveda, food containing all six tastes (Rasas) is considered highly nutritious, satiating and gratifying.

The sweet taste is considered pleasant, nurturing, and calming, and arising from the presence of the elements earth and water. Thus, sweet food has heavy, cooling and unctuous qualities and is digested more slowly than, for example, bitter or tart foods.

The Sanskrit word for sweet, as used in Ayurveda texts, is 'madhura' which can be translated as pleasant, beautiful, and sweet. By its somewhat heavy properties, sweetness soothes the Doshas Vata and Pitta and increases Kapha Dosha. This is due to the similar qualities of sweetness and Kapha Dosha, because in Ayurveda, like increases like. Thus, we can correct imbalances by introducing opposite qualities, and this is usually done intuitively through our body's own intelligence. For example, when Vata Dosha increases in the afternoon, a strong craving for sweets tends to arise, which we often satisfy with a small treat without giving it much thought. This is a common thing seen worldwide, whether it's called vesper, merienda, or afternoon tea.



Sweet food helps to build up the tissues (Dhatus) and to invigorate the body, as well as to strengthen the vital force, called Ojas in Sanskrit. People who are exhausted or drained, or simply going through a stressed phase, often crave sweet and warm foods. Also, as we age and enter the part of life when everyone's Vata Dosha increases significantly, the craving for sweet things tends to increase. This is because, in addition to building tissue, sweetness also calms and grounds the nervous system.

The sweet taste in various foods

We tend to associate the taste of sweet chiefly with conventional sugar. But many other foods have a sweet taste and effect. Foods with a natural sweet taste include:

- Ripe fruits like bananas, mangos, grapes, pears and apples.
- Naturally sweet vegetables, such as carrots and sweet potatoes (yams).
- Grain varieties, e.g. wheat, barley and rice



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- Legumes such as lentils and beans.
- Some dairy products, e.g. milk and Ghee (clarified butter).
- Natural sweeteners such as honey and maple syrup.



With some foods, the sweet taste is obvious, as with ripe fruits, dried fruits and honey. Other products are not usually thought of as sweet, because their sugars are bound in carbohydrate chains and are not released until digested.

When we take more time to chew, foods like rice, pasta and carrots start tasting increasingly sweet. This is because a digestive enzyme called amylase in our saliva breaks down large sugar molecules into smaller ones and also releases sugar molecules from the starch in cereals, thus producing a sweet taste.

Ultimately, almost all foods contain carbohydrates, which the body breaks down into simple sugars. Glucose is a very easily obtained source of energy that enters the blood via the intestines and supplies all organs and the brain with valuable energy.

Along with fats and proteins, carbohydrates belong to the macronutrients and are a fixed part of the daily supply of the human physiology.

When sugar becomes harmful

Sugar has been used since ancient times, but in the past, it was only available to very wealthy households. It's only since the 20th century that

sugar has entered the food industry on a large scale as a cheap sweetener and flavor enhancer.

Sugary foods stimulate the reward center in the brain to release the neurotransmitter dopamine, which produces feelings of happiness and satisfaction. This pleasant experience is ingrained in early childhood, and this is the reason why many people use sweets to reward themselves for an effort, which can lead to a sugar addiction.

Any intake of sugar causes the pancreas to release



insulin, which is necessary for transferring sugar from the blood into the cells. A rapid rise of the blood sugar level is followed by a rapid drop when the insulin kicks in, and this can lead to a cycle of alternating strong craving and exhaustion or fatigue. If one consumes too much sugar, one often finds it harder to concentrate, suffers from mood swings, and eventually paves the way for neurodegenerative diseases such as Alzheimer's disease, which is linked to excessive blood sugar fluctuations.

High sugar intake over a long period of time increases the risk of inflammation (due to hyperacidity in the body), weight gain, diabetes, impaired fat metabolism, tooth decay, liver disease, and intestinal milieu disorders such as fungal colonization. In Ayurveda, these diseases are all manifestations of Ama (metabolic waste products, toxins) caused by an unhealthy lifestyle, with unsuitable nutrition as a main factor.



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Sugar is a hidden ingredient in many products where we may not expect it, such as ketchup, dressings, sauces, yoghurts and ready-to-eat meals. Only a closer look at the label provides information about the sugar content, which is often alarmingly high. Why do producers do this? Because sugar triggers positive feelings in us and makes us want to consume more of the product. Sugar is thus a big seller that, like fat and salt, stimulates the reward system in our brain and drives high sales in the food industry.

And even if you read the label, you may not recognize the sugar, because it can be hidden behind such names as sucrose, maltose, dextrose, malt extract, or HFCS (high fructose corn syrup).



Artificial sweeteners

As industrial sugar increasingly fell into disrepute over the past decades, more and more sugar substitutes were launched on the market. These include erythritol and xylitol, but also stevia, sorbitol and aspartame.

Aspartame, also known as NutraSweet or Canderel, is a sweetener that was accidentally discovered in the 1960s and listed as a biochemical warfare agent until the mid-1970s. Since its approval as a food additive by the Food and Drug Administra-



tion in the U.S., it has overtaken the market and is now used worldwide in foods, beverages and chewing gum.

Aspartame is thus the most commonly used artificial sweetener.

Its carcinogenic effect has long been proven in animal studies, but now, over the last few years, it is also becoming apparent that aspartame has an unfavorable effect on the microbiome, the complex of microorganisms in the intestine.

In general, research has shown that the consumption of artificial sweeteners leads to a deterioration of the glucose metabolism in the human body. When sweeteners such as aspartame, saccharin or sucralose are consumed regularly, sugar enters the blood more quickly, blood glucose peaks at a higher level and glucose tolerance decreases. It is possible that this is caused by a change in the microbiome that affects the way food is processed.

It has also been demonstrated that phenylalanine, an amino acid contained in aspartame, blocks an enzyme called intestinal alkaline phosphatase (IAP). IAP plays a key role in the maintenance of a healthy intestinal barrier and for immune modulation. Inhibition of this enzyme leads to an increase in body weight, blood pressure and metabolic disorders, or, taking these symptoms together, to what is known as metabolic syndrome, which significantly shortens the expected lifespan.



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Enjoying sweetness with Ayurveda

As mentioned above, Ayurveda describes many good qualities of the flavor sweet. However, it also informs us that overindulgence aggravates Kapha Dosha, which can lead to numerous diseases, including weight gain, fluid retention, diabetes, mucous accumulation, intestinal disorders, and a general feeling of heaviness.



Ayurveda recommends making use of the natural sweetness in foods such as ripe fruits, honey, dates or maple syrup, rather than using refined sugar or artificial sweeteners. Natural sweeteners are considered healthier because they contain additional nutrients and minerals, and by this combination, the physiology is better able to process the sugar.

Similarly, it is advisable to consume sweets along with other flavors, in order to obtain a more balanced meal. Ayurveda recommends integrating all

six flavors into each meal to balance the Doshas, promote good digestion, and prevent the development of Ama. Sweet desserts are traditionally enjoyed before the main meal, according to the principle: first the hard-to-digest, then the easier-to-digest.



In Ayurveda, sweets are considered nectar when taken in moderation, but poison when consumed excessively. The rule of thumb is: no more than 3 teaspoons of sweetener per day. This may sound like a lot, but in fact, if you take a closer look at the hidden sugar in our food, it's not much at all: One glass of cola (200 ml) contains the equivalent of 7 sugar cubes, and 100 ml of ketchup even 8!

In part two of this article, we'll write about how you can recognize sugar bombs (including sugar substitutes) and which healthy alternatives you can replace them with.