The Key to Vibrant Health: Know Your Ayurvedic Mind-Body Type

By Sheila Patel, M.D.

In the past decade, personalized medicine has emerged as one of the most promising developments in modern healthcare, offering an approach that tailors medical care and treatment to an individual’s unique characteristics, including a person’s molecular and genetic profile. Advances in scientific research have increased our ability to predict which therapies and treatments will be safe and effective for each person—and which will not.

From the perspective of conventional Western medicine, personalized medicine is a relatively new field, yet an individualized approach to healthcare has been a cornerstone of Ayurvedic medicine for thousands of years. Ayurveda, which is one of the world’s oldest systems of natural healing, teaches that every health-related measure—whether an exercise program, dietary plan, or supplement—must be evaluated in terms of a person’s individual constitutional type and the specific needs that derive from it. In Ayurveda, your constitutional body type is referred to as your prakruti—a Sanskrit term whose literal translation is “essential nature.” Your prakruti is determined at the moment of conception and is the blueprint of all of the innate tendencies built into your mind-body system, including your physical and emotional characteristics.

Learning about your Ayurvedic body type will give you valuable information for nurturing your body’s inner intelligence. This understanding will allow you to make the best choices for your own health and well-being, including identifying the foods, activities, and lifestyle that will have the greatest benefit. Every substance, experience, and sensory impression carries energy and information that your physiology interprets according to the unique characteristics of your body and mind. As an integrative, mind-body healing system, Ayurveda recognizes that the body and mind are inextricably connected. For every event that occurs in the mind, there is a corresponding event in the body. For example, happy thoughts of all kinds, including thoughts of love, peace, compassion, kindness, and tranquility, produce a corresponding state in the body by triggering a flux of neurotransmitters and hormones in the central nervous system.
The Junction of Mind and Body

According to Ayurveda, at the junction point where thought becomes a physical manifestation in the body, there are three governing agents called doshas. Doshas are mind-body principles that govern the flow of intelligence throughout the physiology. They are extremely important because they facilitate the mind’s dialogue with the body. From your earliest years, all of your thoughts, emotions, desires, dreams, and other mental events have provoked changes in your physiology, shaping the body you have today. As the ancient Vedic sages taught, if you want to know what your body will be like in ten years, look at the thoughts you’re having today. Unfortunately, for many people the messages of the mind are more detrimental than beneficial. Years of stressful, fearful thoughts take a toll on the body, leading to accelerated aging and an increased likelihood for illness.

According to Ayurveda, an imbalance in the doshas disrupts the flow of intelligence throughout the entire mind-body physiology and is the underlying cause of disorder and disease. However, restoring balance in the doshas creates the possibility of a mind-body system that is always healthy and evolving. Having underscored the importance of doshas, let’s look at each of the three doshas in more detail and discover which of the doshas is predominant in your constitutional type.

The Three Primary Doshas

There are three doshas in the Ayurvedic system: Vata, Pitta, and Kapha. Each dosha is governed by two of the five master elements or mahabhutas that make up everything within our bodies and everything outside of our bodies: space, air, fire, water, and earth. Space carries all the aspects of pure potentiality—infinitesimal possibilities; air has the qualities of movement and change; fire is hot, direct, and transformational; water is cohesive and protective; and earth is solid, grounded, and stable.

According to Ayurveda, we are all born with a varying amount of each master element in our mind-body constitution. Some of us have more fire and water, which are the two elements that make up the Pitta dosha. If fire and water are the predominant elements in our constitution, then our primary dosha is considered to be Pitta. Here are the three primary doshas, the master elements that comprise them, and how they manifest in our physical body and emotional characteristics—both when these elements are in balance and when they are out of balance.
Vata: Movement and Change

Vata is made up of the space and air elements and controls all movement in the body, including the movement of your vocal cords when you speak, the flow of blood, the motion of your arms and legs, and the movement of thought.

Qualities of Vata: Cold, light, dry, irregular, rough, moving, quick, changeable

If Vata dosha predominates, movement and change are characteristic of your nature.

Physical Characteristics: Those with a predominance of Vata dosha are usually have a thin, light frame and excellent agility. Their energy comes in bursts, and they are likely to experience sudden bouts of fatigue. Vatas typically have dry skin and hair and cold hands and feet. They sleep lightly and their digestion can be sensitive. When the Vata dosha becomes imbalanced, it manifests in the body as weight loss, constipation, hypertension, arthritis, weakness, restlessness, and digestive challenges.

Emotional Characteristics: Vatas love excitement and new experiences. They are quick to anger but also to forgive. When Vatas are in balance, they are energetic, creative, and flexible. They also take initiative and are lively conversationalists. When unbalanced, they are prone to worry and anxiousness and often suffer from insomnia. When they feel overwhelmed or stressed, their response is “What did I do wrong?”

Pitta: Transformation and Metabolism

The elements that make up Pitta are fire and water. Pitta governs all bodily functions related to digestion, metabolism, and energy production.

Qualities of Pitta: Hot, light, intense, penetrating, pungent, sharp, acidic. Those with a predominance of the Pitta principle have a fiery nature that manifests in both body and mind.

Physical Characteristics: People with a predominance of Pitta are usually of medium size and weight. They sometimes have bright red hair, but baldness or thinning hair is also common in a Pitta. They have excellent digestion, which sometimes leads them to believe they can eat anything. They have a warm body temperature. They sleep soundly for short periods of time and have a strong sex drive. When in balance, Pittas have a lustrous complexion, perfect digestion, abundant energy, and a strong appetite. When out of balance, Pittas may suffer from skin rashes, burning sensations, peptic ulcers, excessive body heat, heartburn, and indigestion.
Emotional Characteristics: Pittas have a powerful intellect and a strong ability to concentrate. When they’re in balance, they are good decision makers, teachers, and speakers. They are precise, sharp-witted, direct, and often outspoken. Out-of-balance Pittas can be short-tempered and argumentative. When Pittas are overstressed, their typical response is “What did you do wrong?”

Kapha: Structure and Fluidity

Kapha is derived from the water and earth elements. This dosha controls the structure of the body and maintains strength and the physical form in everything from the bones, muscles, and tendons, right down to the cellular level.

Qualities of Kapha: Heavy, slow, steady, solid, cold, soft, oily

Physical Characteristics: Kapha types have a strong build and excellent stamina. Large, soft eyes; smooth, radiant skin; and thick hair are also important Kapha characteristics. Those who are predominantly Kapha sleep soundly and have regular digestion. But when Kapha builds to excess, weight gain, fluid retention, and allergies manifest in the body. When they’re out of balance, Kapha types may become overweight, sleep excessively, and suffer from asthma, diabetes, and depression.

Emotional Characteristics: Kaphas are naturally calm, thoughtful, and loving. They have an inherent ability to enjoy life and are comfortable with routine. When in balance, Kaphas are strong, loyal, patient, steady, and supportive. People with an excess of Kapha tend to hold on to things, jobs, and relationships long after they are no longer nourishing or necessary. Excess Kapha in the mind manifests as resistance to change and stubbornness. In the face of stress, the typical Kapha response is “I don’t want to deal with it.”

Applying Ayurveda to Medical Treatment

In my medical practice, I always take into consideration the underlying dosha of a patient, or what their main imbalance is, when choosing treatments out of the many options available. For example, if I see someone who has the symptoms of hypertension as well as a Kapha imbalance, I may prescribe a diuretic, since excess water is more likely to be a contributing factor. I would also encourage more exercise or physical activity, since lack of movement is often a causative factor for these individuals. However, in a Vata-type person with hypertension, a diuretic may actually cause harm, as the Vata system tends to have too much dryness (air and space). I’ve observed that Vatas often have more side effects and electrolyte imbalances due to the diuretic medication. For these individuals, a beta-blocker may be a better choice, as this “slows” down the excitatory pathways in the body. In addition, I recommend
meditation and calming activities to settle the excess energy as an adjunct to (or at times, instead of) the medicine. Alternatively, for someone with hypertension who is predominantly a Pitta type or who has a Pitta imbalance, I may choose a calcium-channel blocker, as this medication may be more beneficial in regulating the process of “energy exchange” in the body, which is represented by the fire element of Pitta. This is just one example of the way in which we can tailor our choice of medication to best suit the individual.

In contrast with conventional medicine, which until very recently has assumed that a given disorder or disease is the same in all people, Ayurveda places great importance on recognizing the unique qualities of individual human beings. Ayurveda’s understanding of constitutional types or doshas offers us a remarkably accurate way to pinpoint what is happening inside each individual, allowing us to customize treatment and offer specific lifestyle recommendations to prevent disease and promote health and longevity. Keeping the doshas balanced is one of the most important factors in keeping the whole mind-body system in balance. When our mind-body system is in balance and we are connecting to our inner wisdom and intelligence, then we are most able to realize our full human potential and achieve our optimal state of being.

About the Author

Dr. Sheila Patel is the Chopra Center’s Medical Director and a board-certified family physician who is passionate about bringing holistic healing practices into the Western medical system. She earned her M.D. at the University of Wisconsin Medical School and completed her residency in family medicine at the Ventura County Medical Center in Southern California. For more than a decade, she practiced full-spectrum family medicine, from prenatal care and deliveries to ER coverage and primary care for all ages.

At the Chopra Center, Dr. Patel offers integrative medical consultations that combine the best in conventional medicine with the wisdom of Ayurveda. She also teaches at the Chopra Center’s 6-day and 10-day Perfect Health programs, and is certified as an instructor of Ayurveda, yoga, and meditation. Her special interests include preventive medicine and mind-body medicine, with an emphasis on Ayurveda. Her experience in treating a full range of medical conditions gives her the ability to effectively incorporate lifestyle practices into a patient’s treatment plan.
Dr. Patel also serves as the Clinical Director for the Chopra Center’s research team. She enjoys the opportunity to bring light to the mechanisms of action of mind-body practices, giving them scientific validation. Her hope is that by confirming the benefits of the practices, more patients will gain access to these life-enhancing techniques.

Dr. Patel’s medical writings on a variety of topics have been featured in many integrative and holistic publications, including the Chopra Center’s online newsletter. She is a Volunteer Faculty Member for the University of California, San Diego (UCSD) School of Medicine, where she participates in their Ambulatory Care Apprenticeship Program for first-year and second-year medical students at an outpatient family medicine office. She also mentors medical students at the Chopra Center as part of their integrative medicine rotations. Dr. Patel is an engaging speaker who enjoys bringing the principles of Ayurveda, yoga, and meditation to the public as well as to other health care providers. She is a featured lecturer at the Chopra Center’s signature mind-body medicine conference, Journey into Healing. She has also served as a guest lecturer at several integrative medical conferences, as well as at Bastyr University in San Diego and UCSD School of Medicine.