



From  
**INDIA**  
with  
**LOVE**

It's the ancient science inspiring modern meal plans, travel retreats and self-help books. *WH* delves behind the doshas to find out how – and why – Ayurveda has gone mainstream

WORDS ALIX O'NEILL

# F

eeding your digestive fire. Eating for your dosha. Syncing with the earth's circadian rhythm.

Be so brave as to

announce your burgeoning interest in Ayurveda at the next family gathering and you risk being written off as the kind of wellness warrior who lives for their daily Goop newsletter. But suppress the cynicism by imparting the knowledge that Ayurvedic habits have probably slipped into your companions' daily routines while they weren't looking, and suddenly you're no longer going out on a 'veda limb. Their morning hot water and lemon or turmeric latte addiction? Just two trends that, while feeling totally modern, are actually as old as the hills – around 5,000 years, in fact. Ayurveda's ancient Eastern sister-practice, yoga, has gone from niche to normal, and now #Ayurveda pulls up over 800,000 snaps on Instagram, while beauty giant Clarins has just added turmeric to its cult Double Serum. Ayurveda retreats are the new yoga escapes, and you could fill a library with the new book titles aiming to bring ancient Eastern wisdom to modern Westerners.

'Ayurveda was born out of deep meditation practised by Vedic sages, known as "rishis", who were in search of peace and enlightenment about the secrets of eternal wellbeing,' explains Geeta Vara, an Ayurvedic practitioner in London and author of *Ayurveda: Ancient Wisdom For Modern Wellbeing* (£14.99, Orion Spring). 'The rishis passed on this knowledge to their students and descendants orally until it was transcribed into written texts around 1000 BC. It is from these scriptures that practitioners have learnt this ancient wisdom ever since.' Ayurveda is one of the few indigenous sciences that still thrives; it shapes India's healthcare landscape much like the NHS does here.

To reap the health rewards, first you need to get your head around what Ayurveda actually is. Which, we won't lie, isn't exactly easy. The deeper you dig into Ayurveda, the more confusing it becomes – but allow us to at least offer you an introduction to the basics.



Turmeric: the spice of life

## THE DOWN-LOW ON DOSHAS

It's best to start by understanding the body types fundamental to Ayurvedic thinking – not apples and pears, but doshas. If you haven't come across them on your scrolling travels – the online quizzes that promise to reveal whether you're vata/pitta/kapha are the new 'Which *Game Of Thrones* character are you?' – a reference to them may well have cropped up during a recent spa visit.

The idea is that you're born with all three doshas – vata, pitta and kapha – but one or two of them dominate and, by doing so, influence your every bodily process, from biological functions to thoughts and feelings. Pitta governs digestion and metabolic processes; kapha is responsible for strength, stability and the structure of the body; while vata regulates the nervous system and movement in the body. So far, so straightforward (ish) – but we're not done. The very fact that doshas determine so much means that each carries its own set of physiological and personality traits. Vata types tend to be lean, with protruding joints and veins and are typically prone to dry skin. Creative and erratic, they have short bursts of energy followed by slumps. Easy-going kaphas generally have a more solid frame with large eyes and oily skin. Constantly hungry? You could be a pitta,



especially if you have a moderate build and sharp features. These determined types often end up in positions of power.

But is knowing your dosha DNA any more useful to you than knowing you're a quick-witted Gemini or that rose quartz is your crystal vibe? Yes, says Dr Deepa Apté, director of London-based spa and academy Ayurveda Pura, because while you're born with a dominant dosha (or body type – the terms are interchangeable), this can change over time based on the way you live your life. Let's say you're a pitta-kapha body type,

## AYURVEDA AT A GLANCE



Start the day with hot water or a herbal tea and, if you can, a hot breakfast. Heat will help your 'agni', or digestive fire, burn stronger.



Eat warming food when you're cold – including spices like cumin – and cooling food when you're hot – think mint and coconut milk, as well as food that's cold in temperature.



Your digestion is at its strongest between 10am and 12pm, so try to make lunch your main meal of the day. A light and early supper to follow will allow plenty of time for digestion before you go to sleep.



Eat food when it's ripe or 'sattvic' for easier digestion and good 'prana' – Sanskrit for 'life force'. This is fresh organic food, rather than reheated or processed food. The latter can make you feel lethargic.



Aside from offering flavour, herbs and spices have potent properties, and they're best enjoyed as part of a meal, rather than as a supplement. Think black pepper for digestion and ginger for an energy boost.

but you have to work long hours and it messes with your sleep. This will increase your vata elements – all well and good for someone with a vata dosha, but it will throw you off balance. 'The aim of Ayurveda is to recalibrate your body and way of living back to its default setting – to tip the balance back towards your original basic body type,' says Dr Apté. By incorporating more pitta-kapha principles into your routine – like regularly taking walks in nature or clearing away clutter – you can get that balance back.

### OUT OF WHACK

According to Vara, living by Ayurvedic principles can do more than help you catch up on zeds – it can be life-changing. 'Most people come to my clinic citing lifestyle-related conditions, such as IBS, migraines

so that's one of the key things I look at.' This correlation is a mainstay of Eastern medicine that the West has only recently bought into, with research into the relationship between mental health and diet among the most exciting areas.

Perhaps this goes some way to explaining why Ayurveda is all up in your grill now. If wellness has emerged as a result of a greater appreciation for the intimate relationship between mind and body, Ayurveda is a perfect fit. Vara believes that the rise in conditions linked to lifestyle – stress, IBS and type-2 diabetes – is behind the recent surge in people taking a holistic approach to health. 'More of us are accepting the idea that we are not a sum of our parts and that health issues can be caused by physical, mental, emotional, sensory, relationship or environmental issues,' she explains. 'The antidote to such conditions surely has to be a shift in your

## 'EVERY STEP YOU TAKE, NO MATTER HOW SMALL, HAS A BIG IMPACT'

and obesity,' she explains. 'By the time I see them, they've often tried a whole host of remedies or treatments to no avail and are in search of a sustainable natural solution that may garner better results.'

Vara sends her patients a questionnaire before their first appointment, seeking insights such as the regularity of their bowel movements, their mental focus and their general temperament so she can determine their dosha composition. Then, during an initial 90-minute consultation, she examines a patient's pulse and tongue to get a sense of their digestive health. All things that could go down in your standard 10-minute GP appointment, but what Vara is looking for are any irregularities between what she'd expect from someone with a particular dosha and what clients actually present. A coating on the tongue, sluggish bowels, fatigue or body odour are indicators of 'ama', the Ayurvedic term for toxins. 'Digestion is one of our most vital bodily functions – and an essential component of Ayurveda,' she says. 'Without addressing digestive health, you can't effectively address any other issue. Stress and your emotional state are directly correlated,

lifestyle itself.' Vara's approach is person-focused (no two of her clients will receive the same 'prescription'), and treatment might include a breathing exercise, a herbal prescription or teaching habits of conscious eating. It's stuff like this that's gaining ground in the wider wellness world – breathwork is the new meditation; nootropics is competing for word of the year and if you haven't heard of the intuitive eating trend, see page 16.

### TRY BEFORE YOU BUY

So, you've drunk the turmeric-infused Kool-Aid, got a slightly clearer sense of what Ayurveda is and are more than a little interested in having a crack at it? The good news is anyone can incorporate Ayurvedic principles into their daily routine and you don't need to hop on a plane to Goa to do it. That's according to Jasmine Hemsley. And she should know – she's been downing chai since the rest of us were giving Dukan a go for the first time. The wellness entrepreneur first encountered Ayurveda >