

food for thought

UNDERSTANDING YOUR CHILD'S NUTRITIONAL NEEDS CAN MAKE FOR EASIER MEALTIMES. WENDY ROSENFELDT, A MAHARISHI VEDIC HEALTH EDUCATOR, EXPLAINS THE AYURVEDIC APPROACH

How many times have you lovingly prepared what you felt was a nutritious and delicious meal for your child or toddler only to have it spat out or greeted with exclamations of 'yuk, I'm not gonna eat that'?

Although this may be a frustrating experience and seem like yet another act of defiance on the part of your child, there may be a reason for their lack of appreciation.

Basically, we all know what food we need for our bodies to be healthy. Cravings are subtle signals from our cells telling us the type of tastes and textures we need to maintain a balanced physiology. While respected by pregnant women, these dietary desires are often dismissed by the rest of us.

Indeed the process of craving the right foods for our bodies is distorted by advertising, misinformation and bad habits. Television ads attempt to convince us that if we drink diet soft drinks we will be beautiful and thin. Doctors and dietitians generally give uniform advice, rarely acknowledging that we each have a unique physiology

– their preferences for food better reflects what their bodies actually need. The Ayurvedic theory of doshas can help us to understand our child's likes and dislikes, reactions to food and specific dietary needs.

THE THEORY OF THE DOSHAS

According to the dosha theory, everything in the universe is made up of different proportions of space, air, fire, water and earth. These elements combine to create the three doshas: Vata, Pitta and Kapha. Vata is expressed as space and air and is responsible for all movement in the universe. It has the light, dry, changeable, quick qualities associated with the wind. Pitta dosha is expressed mainly as fire and governs metabolism and transformation. It shares the qualities of the fire, being hot, intense, sour, red, orange and yellow. Kapha, expressed as water and earth, is responsible for all cohesion and structure in the universe. It is almost opposite to Vata, being heavy, slow, steady, sweet and moist.

In our physiologies we also have a mixture of these elements. No-one is purely one dosha, but a combination of Vata, Pitta and Kapha. The basic nature of a child can give a clue as to which dosha is most likely to go out of balance. However anyone can experience too much Vata, Pitta or Kapha.

Imbalances in the doshas can be treated by changes in diet and lifestyle. Just as the qualities of Vata, Pitta and Kapha can be seen in our physiology they are also present in our food. Food that is light, dry and cold, such as lettuce or rice crackers, is Vata in nature. Spices and chilli, sour yoghurt and tomatoes express the fiery qualities of Pitta. Food that is heavy, unctuous and

sweet, like milk or cheese, is Kaphic in nature. Each dosha is pacified by certain tastes and qualities.

Excessive doshas are balanced by bringing in the opposite quality. For example, if you have too much of the heavy, mucous-like qualities of Kapha it is best to avoid ice-cream and dairy products and favour Vata-predominant food such as leafy green vegetables or barley grain. Pitta's excess heat is soothed by sweet, juicy fruit; while airy feelings associated with too much Vata can be balanced by a sweet, warm drink or a salty biscuit.

VATA

Children with a predominance of Vata in their nature have a light build; they are quick, enthusiastic and changeable. Their digestion and sleep patterns are easily disturbed if they get anxious or too excited, they have active imaginations and tend to daydream. Too much Vata can manifest in poor sleep and lack of concentration, disinterest in food, problems with elimination, dry, flaky skin and poor circulation.

Vata is balanced by sweet, sour and salty foods. This explains why when people feel stressed or spaced out they crave junk food. In fact, the fast-food industry predominantly consists of food that is Vata-pacifying. While hot chips and doughnuts may be soothing when you've been rushing about or overworking, the airy feelings linked with Vata are also appeased by warm soups or fruit toast.

For a child with a predominantly Vata nature, or for any child where Vata may be in excess, it is important to have regular meals in a settled environment. Turn the TV off and sit with them while they eat even if you are not having a meal. They may not have much interest in food, preferring to play than eat, so it is important that sitting down to eat at predictable times is part of their daily routine. A Vata-balancing diet for children can

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and therefore require specialised advice. Cravings for sweet food, originally designed to encourage our hunter-gatherer ancestors to search for fruit and berries, has habituated into the trek to the local convenience store for a chocolate fix.

However, while they are young, children are immune from the influence of ads and addictions



include soups; nourishing, easy-to-digest grains like couscous and quinoa; milky desserts; stewed fruit and cooked vegetables with a predominantly sweet taste, such as carrots and sweet potatoes.

PITTA

Pitta natured kids have a regular build and strong digestive system. They are good eaters and can get irritable if they miss a meal. They tend to have red or blonde hair and skin that is fair or freckly, and are often strong willed and determined by nature. Excess Pitta can cause skin rashes and diarrhoea, hot tempers and frustration, or the feeling of being hungry all the time.

Pitta is pacified by bitter, astringent and sweet tastes. A salad is the perfect Pitta-pacifying meal, as leafy greens contain both bitter and astringent

predominately Kapha in constitution generally have good appetites but are a little slower when it comes to digesting their food.

It is important for children who are Kapha predominant, or any child with excess Kapha, to get plenty of exercise. Cold food and drinks need to be avoided as they create mucous and congestion. A Kapha-balancing diet can include a variety of vegetables such as broccoli, cauliflower, celery and pumpkin. Food should be warm but not too unctuous. Small amounts of dairy are OK. Barley is a particularly good grain to offset too much Kapha and can be included in soups.

BALANCE BY TASTE

Understanding the influence of the doshas can help us to satisfy our children's culinary desires while keeping them balanced and healthy. Instead of dismissing our child's craving for sweet food and insisting they eat a salad, or giving in to their demands for lollies and chocolate, offer them sweet fruit, rice pudding or pancakes with fruit jam. If the desire for sweet is prompted by Vata

being out of balance, your child may also be satisfied with salty or sour tastes. The qualities of a meal are also important. Vata is pacified by heavy, oily, warm food. Pitta is balanced by food that is heavy, oily and cold while Kapha-pacifying food is light, dry and warm by nature.

It is important to offer your child a variety of tastes. With sweet, sour and salty foods predominant in the Western diet, children can grow up unaccustomed to bitter, pungent and astringent foods. Cooking with small amounts of spice, such as ginger, turmeric and fenugreek, can ensure that all the six tastes are included.

GOOD DIGESTION

Having regular mealtimes aids the digestive process and sets good eating patterns for our children. Our bodies, including our digestive systems, tend to thrive on a good routine. Our metabolism gets used to processing food at a certain rate and if we give it a regular intake of food, it can provide us with a constant supply of energy. Routine consumption of food also supports regularity of appetite and elimination.

The digestive fire is strongest at midday, so it

is best to eat your main meal between 12pm and 1pm for optimal digestion. If you miss a meal, or eat later than usual, Vata and Pitta tend to go out of balance. With Vata this manifests as poor concentration, feeling spaced out and then disinterest in food. For a Vata natured child, whose digestive fire is on the light side, a delay in eating can cause their appetite to diminish altogether. This explains why a child who may have been asking for food and had to wait may get involved in another activity and then refuse to eat. However, they will generally return to the kitchen later on with a craving for sweet or salty food.

Children who are Pitta predominant become irritable and frustrated if they do not eat on time. When the fire of Pitta is not satisfied by food it moves to other areas of the body, manifesting as a hot temper or skin rashes. This can also create the desire to overeat in an attempt to balance the feeling of depletion.

The Kapha predominant child can also experience an increase of Vata and Pitta when their meals are late. This can cause them to crave sweet, heavy, oily foods, which are best only in moderation for their constitutional type.

ADJUST YOUR MENU TO REFLECT DAILY CHANGES

While it is good to follow these guidelines for balancing your basic constitutional type, our desires for particular food are also influenced by the climate, seasons, time of life and daily activities. With all the physiological changes going on in a child, their needs may vary widely, changing from day to day. One day they may love cauliflower and the next want nothing but pasta. By respecting your child's desires and offering them nutritious options you are giving them the best chance to acquire both a balanced physiology and a healthy attitude to eating. ●

For information on seminars and consultations or the Maharishi Vedic approach to health including Ayurveda, contact Wendy on 0438 507 188 or 07 5499 9580. To locate your nearest Maharishi Vedic Health Centre check out maharishivedichealth.org.

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tastes. The astringent taste has a drying quality that draws moisture to it and can also be found in lentils and honey.

Pitta natured children enjoy food and have good appetites. They need to be careful of processed foods and artificial colourings as this can make them hyperactive. Pitta-aggravating food, such as tomatoes, oranges, onions and chilli, can create skin rashes. A Pitta-pacifying diet includes sweet fruit like watermelon, mangoes and grapes; cooling vegetables such as zucchini, squash and asparagus; most of the grains and small amounts of dairy products.

KAPHA

Children with more Kapha in their constitution have more solid builds and thicker hair. By nature they are slower and more emotionally stable than Vata or Pitta children. An excess of Kapha's watery, earthy qualities can result in coughs, colds and excess mucous, weight gain and lethargy.

Kapha, being almost opposite to Vata, is balanced by bitter, astringent and pungent tastes. A spicy lentil curry helps to offset the sticky, cold, heavy characteristics of Kapha. Children who are