



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

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In the past decade, personalized medicine has emerged as one of the most promising developments in modern health care, 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. The five elements are space, air, fire, water, and earth.

- Space is pure potential and infinite possibilities.
- Air has the qualities of movement and change.
- Fire is hot, direct, and transformational.
- Water is cohesive and protective.
- 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 body, mind, and emotions—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, this imbalance 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, they are likely to ask, "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, they typically ask, "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, or 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 well-being.

## About the Author

Dr. Sheila Patel is the Chief Medical Officer at Chopra Global and a board-certified family physician. She has been an educator and leader at Chopra since 2010 and is a content developer and lead educator for Chopra certifications, retreats, and events. Dr. Patel has offered integrative medical consultations, developed signature programs and products for health and wellbeing, leads health training at Chopra partnership properties, and has been a part of the Chopra research team bringing scientific validation to mind-body practices.

In addition to certifications in meditation, yoga, and Ayurvedic lifestyle, Dr. Patel is a board certified family physician. For more than a decade, she practiced full-spectrum family medicine, from prenatal care and deliveries, to ER coverage, and inpatient and outpatient primary care for all ages. In addition to her role at Chopra, she maintains a voluntary clinical position at the University of San Diego School of Medicine in the Department of Family Medicine and Public Health and is a guest speaker at various wellbeing and scientific conferences. She continues to see patients in an outpatient family medicine practice in Southern California bringing holistic healing tools and practices to her patients to help them live to their fullest potential.

She believes the best way to achieve wellness is to integrate all of the knowledge available to us, from modern medicine as well as from traditional healing systems. Her hope is that more people will gain access to these life-enhancing techniques and learn how to implement them into their lives for optimal well-being.