

AGNI

Ancient ayurvedic healers conceived of the upper digestive tract as containing a literal fire that burns food as a person consumes it. This fire is called *Agni*, a Sanskrit word related to the English verb, “to ignite.” In this way, digestion is similar to cooking food over an open fire: “The fireplace is the small intestine, the fire is the agni, the cooking pot is the stomach and the fuel is yesterday’s digested food. This fuel gives its energy to the wall of the intestines to discharge digestive enzymes [to kindle the agni]” (Lad 84). There are four possible states of an individual’s agni:

1. **Balanced.** When the agni is balanced, a person is attracted to the food that will bring balance and harmony to her constitution and will also be in close touch with her appetite. This means that when she sits down to eat, her food is so appealing that she salivates.
2. **High.** When the agni is too high a person’s hunger is never satisfied and he will eat all of the time. This is likely to occur if a person has a high percentage of pitta dosha (fire and water elements) in his constitution. It is not ideal for the agni to burn too brightly as the fire can begin to eat up the tissues of the body, including fat, muscle, bone, lymph, nerves, reproductive secretions, etc.
3. **Low.** When a person’s agni is low, her appetite is suppressed, it is hard for her to distinguish when she is full during a mealtime and her food is not completely digested. This undigested substance is converted into toxic waste (referred to as ama). Ama is at the root of nearly all dis-ease in the body from minor inconveniences like acne to more serious troubles such as Chronic Fatigue Syndrome.
4. **Variable.** This occurs in a person of vata nature (air and ether elements). It results from a lack of a daily schedule. Bring to mind your typical day and if each day varies greatly from the day before or after, it is likely that you have a high percentage of vata in your present constitution. A person of vata nature will resist eating as it makes him feel unlike himself since food introduces a foreign element into his body: earth.

In short, the body must be rebuilt every day by the food and beverages that we consume. Our stomach, in essence, is the brain of our digestive tract. This is what we are referring to when we use the expression “trust your gut.” Here are some surprising tips on how to tend to your fire during the summer months. If you live by these ideas, you will balance your agni and therefore have an even more trustworthy gut response to life questions big and small...

For vata (air and ether)-dominant folks: Think twice before reaching for ice-cold drinks. The coldness of the drink can extinguish your agni causing you to have a low appetite, constipation and gas. Take your drinks at room temperature and consider a tea infusion of equal parts cinnamon, cardamom and bay leaf before each meal to increase the digestibility and lower the gas-producing qualities of your food.

For pittas (fire and water): You are perhaps the only constitutional type who can get away with consuming cold drinks and not suffering digestive consequences. However, if your pitta

dosha is spinning out of control in the summer months in the form of rashes, acne, migraines, diarrhea, anger/irritability, hyper-criticism, etc. consider a tea of equal parts cumin, coriander and fennel, placed in a blue glass cup and steeped overnight under the light of the moon. This drink will literally help you to chill out.

For Kaphas (earth and water): It is quite common for kapha types to be out of touch with their appetite. Thus it is recommended that you take a tea mixture of equal parts ginger and freshly-ground black pepper to trigger the digestive enzymes. It is crucial to avoid cold drinks if your kapha is imbalanced in the form of swelling or weight gain. It may seem torturous to deprive yourself of an iced drink after summertime exercise, but icy substances will slow down metabolic processes and thwart weight loss efforts.

Another fantastic ayurvedic secret for boosting agni is ginger tea made by chopping up fresh ginger and steeping it for several minutes. If the thought of a hot summer drink is completely repulsive, refrigerate the tea or leave it on the counter until it reaches room temperature. Steeping the tea overnight will create a more potent and therefore more effective digestive stimulant. Amazingly, ginger is tri-doshic, meaning vatas, pittas and kaphas benefit from its magical qualities.

Lastly, try this scrumptious therapeutic summer tonic:

- 1/4 C. pomegranate juice—prevents/decreases fibroid and tumor formation
- small handful of nuts—boosts immune function and greases brain synapses
- 1 banana—ripe to increase digestion, unripe to stop diarrhea
- 1 scoop whey or soy protein—kidney tonic
- 1 T. flax oil—boosts serotonin levels (improves brain function), lubricates intestines
- 1 tsp. super energy greens—reduces pitta (heat) in the blood, revives flora in intestines

(Patricia Layton transmitted most of this information at the Kanyakumari Institute of Ayurveda.)