

Rasa - The Six Tastes

Some substances have only one taste while others contain many tastes. Every substance's unique combination of attributes will influence its actions in the body. Taste can have a long-standing effect on the doshas, creating either therapeutic or unbalancing actions on body and mind. Each taste has a psychological component, creating positive or negative influence, which becomes apparent with frequent usage.

Sweet (Madhura)



The sweet taste is present in foods such as sugar, milk, rice, wheat, dates, maple syrup and licorice. Earth and water are the elements that make up the sweet taste. The qualities are usually oily, cooling and heavy. The sweet taste increases the vital essence of life.

In moderation: When used moderately, it is wholesome to the body and anabolic in action, promoting the growth of plasma, blood, muscles, fat, bones, marrow and reproductive fluids. Proper use gives strength and longevity. It encourages the senses, improves complexion, promotes healthy skin and hair and a good voice. Sweet taste can relieve thirst, burning sensations and be invigorating. It can bring about stability and heal emaciation.

In excess: In spite of all these good qualities, excessive use can produce many disorders in all the doshas. Sweet foods especially aggravate kapha and cause cold, cough, congestion, heaviness, loss of appetite, laziness and obesity. They may also cause abnormal muscle growth, lymphatic congestion, tumours, edema and diabetes.

Sour (Amla)

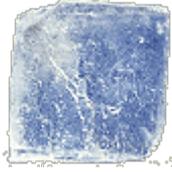


Sour taste is found in foods like citrus fruits, sour cream, yogurt, vinegar, cheese, lemon, unripe mango, green grapes and fermented food. Sour substances are liquid, light, heating, oily in nature and anabolic in action.

In moderation: When used in moderation, they are refreshing and delicious to the taste, stimulate appetite, improve digestion, energize the body, nourish the heart, enlighten the mind and cause salivation. Earth and fire are the two elements.

In excess: If one uses the sour taste in excess, it can cause sensitive teeth, excessive thirst, quick, reflexive closure of eyes, hyperacidity, heartburn, acid indigestion, ulcers and perforations. As sour taste has a fermentation action, it is toxic to the blood and can cause skin conditions like dermatitis, acne, eczema, edema, boils and psoriasis. The hot qualities may lead to acidic pH in the body and may cause burning in the throat, chest, heart, bladder and urethra.

Salty (Lavana)



Sea salt, rock salt and kelp are common examples of the salty taste. Water and fire are the predominant elements. Salty is heating, heavy, oily and hydrophilous in nature.

In moderation: When used moderately, it relieves vata and intensifies kapha and pitta. Due to its water element, it is laxative and, owing to the fire element, it lessens spasm and pain of the colon. Like sweet and sour tastes, it is anabolic in action. When taken in moderation, it promotes growth and maintains water electrolyte balance. Salty taste is so strong that it nullifies the effect of all tastes. It stimulates salivation, improves the flavour of food, aids digestion, absorption and elimination of wastes.

In excess: Too much salt in the diet may cause aggravation of pitta and kapha. It makes the blood thick and viscous, causes hypertension and worsens skin conditions. Heating sensations, fainting, wrinkling and baldness may be due to excessive use of salt. Owing to its hydrophilous nature, it may induce edema or water retention. Patchy hair loss, ulcers, bleeding disorders, skin eruption, hyperacidity and hypertension may be disorders of overuse of the salty taste.

Pungent (Katu)



The pungent taste is present in foods such as cayenne pepper, chili pepper, black pepper, onion, radish, garlic, mustard, ginger and asafoetida. Fire and air are the important elements present in pungent. It is light, drying and heating in nature. It soothes kapha but excites pitta and vata.

In moderation: When used in the diet in moderation, it improves digestion, absorption and cleans the mouth. It clears the sinuses by stimulating nasal secretions and lacrimation. It aids circulation, breaks up clots, helps with the elimination of waste products and kills parasites and germs. It removes obstructions and brings clarity of perception.

In excess: Apart from these positive actions, pungent may cause negative reactions when it is overused in the daily diet. It can kill sperm and ova, causing sexual debility in both sexes. It may induce burning, choking, fainting, fatigue with heat and thirst. If it leads to pitta aggravation, it can cause diarrhea, heartburn and nausea. With vata provocation from overuse of pungent taste, giddiness, tremors, insomnia and pain in the leg muscles may occur. Peptic ulcers, colitis and skin conditions may also result from excessive use.

Bitter (Tikta)



Examples of bitter taste are found in bitter melon (*Momordica Charantia*), turmeric root, dandelion root (*Taraxacum Officinale*), aloe vera (*Aloe barbadensis*), yellow dock (*Rumex crispus*), fenugreek (*Trigonella foenum-graecum*), sandalwood (*Santalum album* or white sandalwood, on the Indian endangered list, banned from export), rhubarb and coffee. Bitter is the taste most lacking in the North American diet. It has the air and space elements and is cool, light and dry in nature.

In moderation: It increases vata and decreases pitta and kapha. Though bitter is not delicious in itself, it promotes the flavour of the other tastes. It is anti-toxic and kills germs. It helps to relieve burning sensations, itching, fainting and obstinate skin disorders. It reduces fever and stimulates firmness of the skin and muscles. In a small dose, it can relieve intestinal gas and works as a digestive bitter tonic. It is drying to the system and causes a reduction in fat, bone marrow, urine and faeces.

In excess: Over-consumption of the bitter taste may deplete plasma, blood, muscles, fat, bone marrow and semen, which may result in sexual debility. Extreme dryness and roughness, emaciation and weariness may be the result of excessive eating of the bitter taste. At times, it may induce dizziness and unconsciousness

Astringent (Kasaya)



Unripe banana, pomegranate, chickpeas, green beans, yellow split peas, okra, goldenseal (*Hydrastis Canadensis*), turmeric, lotus seed, alfalfa sprouts, mango seed, arjuna (*Terminalia Arjuna*) and alum (crystallized double sulfates) are examples of astringent taste. It produces a typical drying, choking sensation in the throat. It is derived from the Air and Earth elements and is cooling, drying and heavy in nature.

In moderation: When taken in moderation, it calms pitta and kapha but excites vata. The astringent taste absorbs water and causes dryness of mouth, difficulty of speech and constipation. It aids in healing ulcers and stops bleeding by promoting clotting.

In excess: Excessive use of astringent foods may cause choking, absolute constipation, distention, obstruction of voice, heart spasm and stagnation of circulation. It may affect the sex drive leading to depletion of sperm. It can give rise to emaciation, convulsions, Bell's palsy, stroke paralysis and other neuromuscular vata disorders.

According to Ayurveda, each taste used collectively or individually in the appropriate dose brings about balance of all the bodily systems and yields happiness and good health to all living beings