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FEBRUARY 2015

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BY THE SIVANANDA YOGA SCHOOL

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HOW TO DRINK WATER

PART 1

THE PHILOSOPHY AND PRACTICE OF OPTIMAL HYDRATION

Did you know that drinking water the right way can help you burn fat, improve digestion, and increase immunity? Did you know that drinking the wrong way can do the opposite—make you heavy, sluggish and sick? Well, it's true, and sadly few of us know how to properly hydrate to achieve these results, including the very health professionals we trust to give us this information.

A common recommendation in fitness circles is to drink half your ideal body weight (lbs, not kg) in ounces of water. That is, if your ideal weight is 180 lbs, then you should drink 90 ounces of water daily. This is a good practice, however it fails to address vital details like what kind of water, as well as when and how to drink it. For example, health consultants often recommend iced drinks because these force the body to warm them up, burning calories in the process. However, the negative metabolic effect of drinking ice water greatly outweighs the few extra calories expended, which in the long term results in sluggish digestion and weight gain, not weight loss. The same is true of water drunk after eating. Hydrochloric acid has a PH of about 2—water's PH is over 7. By diluting HCL while it's busy digesting, you compromise the entire digestive chain, making it harder for your body to break down and assimilate nutrients.



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Calories in, Calories out?

In a recent survey, top dieticians were asked what they do to lose a few extra pounds. Their responses were predictable: reduce calorie intake, increase calorie expenditure. One example; eat cauliflower because it is a bulky, low-cal food. This 'calories in, calories out' model is sadly antiquated however, an example of how Western nutrition models haven't changed much in the past 20 years, and how they continue to ignore the whole person while focusing on their parts. This is the 'Frankenstein' school of medicine, obsessing on the trees and missing the forest in the process.

Fortunately, the Vedic tradition of India has for thousands of years nurtured a 'whole person' approach, both in its spiritual disciplines (like yoga and Vedanta), as well as its physical sciences, (like Ayurveda). There is no one asana practice that works for everyone with backache; there is no single herb that cures everyone with insomnia. These are all taken on a case-by-case basis according to the physical constitution of the patient, as well as the state of their metabolic fire (agni).

Agni

Agni in Ayurveda stands for the totality of metabolic processes including digestion, absorption and assimilation. Lack of good agni is said to be the cause of all disease, and healthy agni is the best protection against illness. And as it turns out, one of the easiest ways to kindle agni is through the judicious and timely use of water, the focus of this article.

Just because water has no calories doesn't mean it can't have a dramatic effect on how we burn calories. A recent study in the Journal of Diagnostic Research took 50 obese girls and had them drink 500 ml of lukewarm water 30 minutes before meals. The results? The group burned an average of 1.5 kg while improving their body mass index. That is, they experienced body composition changes, burning fat and gaining muscle, without dieting or exercise.





This is an example of where the calories in/calories out model breaks down, because it ignores important points like the timing of meals, as well as critical systems in the body such as enzymatic activity, hormonal function, and the all-important microbiome (the totality of bacteria in your gut). These are all components of agni, which when primed not only kindles digestion and metabolism, but your immune and hormone functions as well.

Consider that children can often run on one sandwich a day (expending at least as many calories as they take in) and not only not lose weight, but actually increase in size in a matter of weeks or months. That is because it takes more than calories and nutrients to nourish life. You can pump vitamins and supplements into the body, but if it cannot properly utilise them, they are not only wasted, but become waste products themselves, further blocking and damaging our digestion.

Therefore, kindling agni is paramount. One of the easiest ways is to drink water the right way. This means pre-hydrating your stomach by drinking 15-30 minutes before meals. Pre-hydrating works because the stomach has a bicarbonate buffer (called kledaka kapha in Ayurveda) that prevents its lining from being burned by too much HCL (pacaka pitta). The stronger the buffer, the more HCL it can hold. When you drink water before meals you strengthen this buffer, and the stomach in turn receives more HCL to digest that giant hamburger and fries you are about to eat. Your stomach doesn't have teeth to break down food, it has HCL- do it a favour and give it more.

By drinking water before meals and not after, you also do away with the need for most digestive enzymes because you are encouraging your body to make its own. But when you drink during and especially after meals, you dilute your body's HCL and make it that much harder to digest food. An Ayurvedic rule of thumb- don't drink for up to 2 hours after eating. That is why it is so important to hydrate before food, so you will not feel thirsty during and after meals. Then you can eat more of the good stuff on your plate without filling your stomach with liquid. Join us next month for more powerful ways to use water for healthy inner and outer skin, energy and rejuvenation!

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