

Obesity as per Ayurveda: Understanding the ancient perspective on modern weight issues

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Abstract

Obesity, a complex lifestyle disorder characterized by excess accumulation of body fat, is a rising global health concern. Ayurveda, the ancient Indian system of medicine, offers a holistic approach to understanding and managing obesity, known as *Sthoulya* in Ayurvedic texts. This article explores the causes, classification, and treatment of obesity through the lens of Ayurveda, highlighting its unique concepts of *Dosha*, *Agni*, *Ama*, and *Medo Dhatu* imbalance. Obesity has reached epidemic proportions worldwide, contributing to a variety of chronic conditions such as diabetes, hypertension, and cardiovascular diseases. Modern medicine often emphasizes diet control and exercise, with a focus on calorie balance. Ayurveda, however, delves deeper, addressing the root imbalances within the body and mind. Recognized as *Sthoulya* in classical Ayurvedic literature, obesity is not merely excess body weight but a manifestation of disturbed *Dosha* dynamics, faulty metabolism, and impaired tissue formation. Obesity is increasingly being recognized as a major public health concern, linked to numerous chronic conditions including diabetes, hypertension, and cardiovascular diseases. Ayurveda, a 5,000-year-old healing system, provides a holistic framework for understanding and addressing obesity not just as a physical condition but as a systemic imbalance. The condition is classified under *Medoroga*, a disorder of fat metabolism.

Keywords: *Sthoulya*; Emphasizes; *Dosha*; *Dhatu*; Formation; *Medoroga*

1. Introduction

Obesity, referred to as *Medoroga* in Ayurveda, is a condition characterized by an excessive accumulation of *Meda Dhatu* (fat tissue) in the body. While modern medicine views obesity primarily as a metabolic disorder linked to diet, lifestyle, and genetics, Ayurveda offers a more holistic perspective, focusing on the balance of bodily humors (*Doshas*), digestive strength (*Agni*), and daily habits (*Dinacharya*).

2. The ayurvedic understanding of obesity

According to Ayurvedic principles, the human body is governed by three *Doshas*: Vata, Pitta, and Kapha. Obesity is primarily a disorder of Kapha *Dosha*, which is responsible for structure, lubrication, and stability in the body. When Kapha becomes aggravated—due to poor dietary habits, lack of physical activity, or mental stress—it leads to an excessive accumulation of fat. However, Ayurveda also considers the role of *Agni* (digestive fire). A weakened *Agni* fails to properly metabolize food, resulting in the production of *Ama* (toxins), which accumulate in the tissues and contribute to weight gain. Hence, obesity is often a sign of both impaired digestion and *Dosha* imbalance.

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2.1. Classification of obesity

Ayurveda recognizes individual constitution (*Prakriti*) in determining susceptibility to obesity. Predominantly **Kapha Prakriti** individuals are more prone due to their inherent qualities of heaviness, sluggishness, and stability.

Obesity is also classified as:

- **Sahaja Sthoulya** (congenital or genetic obesity)
- **Apathyanimittaja Sthoulya** (acquired due to lifestyle and dietary habits)

2.2. Etiology (nidana) of obesity in ayurveda

According to the **Charaka Samhita**, the primary causes of obesity include:

- **Atisnigdha Bhojana** (excessive intake of oily and heavy foods)
- **Avyayama** (lack of physical activity)
- **Divasvapna** (daytime sleeping)
- **Mithya Ahara-Vihara** (improper diet and lifestyle)
- **Beeja Dosha** (hereditary or genetic predisposition)

These factors lead to an imbalance in *Kapha Dosha* and *Medo Dhatu*, resulting in the accumulation of fat and sluggish metabolism.

2.3. Pathogenesis (samprapti)

The pathogenesis of *Sthoulya* involves:

2.3.1. Agni Mandya (low digestive fire)

- **Ama Utpatti** (toxic accumulation due to incomplete digestion)
- **Medo Dhatu Vriddhi** (excess formation of fat tissue)
- **Kapha Prakopa** (exacerbation of Kapha Dosha)
- **Srotorodha** (blockage of bodily channels)

These disruptions lead to excessive nourishment of the *Medo Dhatu* at the cost of other tissues, culminating in *Sthoulya*.

2.3.2. Signs and symptoms

- Excessive fat accumulation, especially around the abdomen
- Lethargy and low energy
- Breathlessness on minimal exertion
- Excessive perspiration and thirst
- Sluggish digestion and constipation
- Low self-esteem and depression (in chronic cases)

2.4. Clinical features (lakshana)

Ayurvedic texts list specific signs and symptoms of obesity:

- **Ati Medas** (excess fat)
- **Ati Sthoola Sharira** (excessively bulky body)
- **Alpavyayama Sahishnuta** (poor exercise tolerance)
- **Swedadhikya** (excessive sweating)
- **Kshudra Shwasa** (shortness of breath on exertion)
- **Daurbalya** (weakness despite apparent strength)

2.5. Complications

Long-term complications can include diabetes (*Madhumeha*), hypertension, joint problems (*Sandhigata Vata*), and reduced vitality (*Ojas Kshaya*).

2.6. Ayurvedic management of obesity

Ayurveda emphasizes a personalized and multi-pronged approach to managing obesity:

2.6.1. Ahara (Dietary Regulation)

- Favor foods that are light, dry, and warm.
- Include barley, millets, green leafy vegetables, and bitter-tasting items.
- Avoid heavy, sweet, fried, and dairy-based items.
- Drink warm water infused with ginger or lemon to aid digestion.

2.6.2. Vihara (Lifestyle Modifications)

- Regular physical activity, especially early morning walks.
- Avoid sleeping during the day.
- Practice stress-relief techniques such as meditation and Pranayama.

2.6.3. Shodhana (Detoxification Therapies)

- **Panchakarma**, particularly *Vamana karma* and *Virechana karma* helps to removing the excessive Kapha and toxins out from the body.
- *Udwartana karma* in which herbal dry powder massage is used to effectiveness in improving the blood circulation and reducing subcutaneous fat in the body.

2.6.4. Shamana (Palliative Therapies)

- The Ayurvedic formulations like *Triphala Churna*, *Medohar Guggulu*, *Medohar Vati*, *Medohar Kwatha* etc. help in fat metabolism and digestion.

2.6.5. Herbal Remedies

Triphala, *Guggulu*, *Mustaka*, *Haritaki*, and *Vrikshamla* are commonly used to improve metabolism and reduce fat tissue.

Table 1 Herbs Useful in Obesity Management

Ayurvedic name / herbs	Botanical name	Action
Vrikshamla	Garcinia indica	Fat metabolism enhancer
Guggul	Commiphora	Anti-obesity, lipid-lowering
Mustaka	Cyperus rotundus	Digestive and carminative
Haritaki	Terminalia chebula	Detoxifying, digestive
Triphala	Terminalia Chebula (Haritaki) Terminalia Bellerica (Vibhitaki) Emblica Officinalis (Amalaki)	Regulates metabolism

3. Rasayana (Rejuvenation)

- After detoxification, Rasayana herbs are administered to rejuvenate tissues and restore balance.

4. Yoga Poses for Obesity

- Bow pose (Dhanurasana), Sun salutation (Surya Namaskar), Bridge pose (Setu Bandha Sarvangasana), Boat pose (Naukasana), Triangular pose (Trikonasana), Warrior pose (Veerabhadrasana), Plank pose (Chaturangadandasana), Shoulder stand (Sarvangasana), Cobra pose (Bhujangasana), Downward-facing dog (Adho Mukha Svanasana)
- Morning walking and exercise.
- Manage stress with meditation and proper sleep.

5. Discussion

Ayurveda, the ancient Indian system of medicine, offers a unique perspective on the etiology, pathology, and holistic management of obesity. Unlike modern medicine, which often focuses solely on calorie intake and exercise, Ayurveda views obesity as a result of imbalances in the doshas particularly *Kapha dosha* as well as improper lifestyle and diet. This article explores the Ayurvedic understanding of obesity, its causative factors, signs and symptoms, and the traditional approaches to treatment including diet, lifestyle, herbal remedies, and purification therapies. Obesity is not merely an excess of weight; it is a complex imbalance affecting both physical and mental health. Ayurveda treats it not just as a physical condition, but as a manifestation of deeper imbalances in lifestyle and digestion. By correcting these roots causes through diet, lifestyle, detoxification, and herbal support, Ayurveda offers a sustainable and holistic path to weight management.

6. Conclusion

Ayurveda provides a comprehensive and individualized approach to the prevention and treatment of obesity. Unlike conventional models, it emphasizes balancing the body's energies, detoxifying the system, and restoring digestive health. With its time-tested therapies, personalized diet, and herbal support, Ayurveda offers sustainable solutions to address obesity holistically. Ayurveda provides a time-tested, holistic, and individualized framework for understanding and managing obesity. By addressing the root causes and emphasizing natural healing through diet, lifestyle, and herbal remedies, Ayurveda offers an effective alternative or complement to conventional approaches. Modern research and clinical validation of these methods can enhance their integration into mainstream obesity management strategies.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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