

Wisdom with Age: Ayurvedic and Modern Approaches to Positive Aging

A bölcsesség korral jár: A pozitív idősödés ayurvédikus és modern megközelítése

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Abstract: This article takes a look at views on aging through Ayurvedic and modern perspectives. Aging is often seen negatively in society, but Ayurveda views it as a natural process and also offers therapies like Rasayana to promote longevity and well-being. In Ayurvedic approach emphasis is given to balance physical and mental health. Attention is given to addressing the dominance of Vata in old age. Modern research aligns with these concepts. It shows that a positive mindset improves mental and physical health in older adults. The article highlights the confluence of ancient Ayurvedic wisdom and contemporary science. It emphasizes the importance of respecting the wisdom of the elderly and aging gracefully.

Keywords: Ayurveda, positive aging, Rasayana, graceful aging

Absztrakt: Ez a cikk az öregedéssel kapcsolatos nézeteket vizsgálja ayurvédikus és modern perspektívák tükrében. Az öregedés társadalmi megítélése gyakran negatív, de az Ayurveda ezt természetes folyamatnak tekinti és olyan terápiákat kínál, mint a Rasayana, hogy elősegítse a hosszú élettartamot és a jó közérzetet. Az ayurvédikus megközelítésben hangsúlyt fektetnek a fizikai és mentális egészség egyensúlyára. Figyelmet fordítanak a Vata időskori dominanciájának kezelésére. A modern kutatások is alátámasztják ezt a teóriát. Kimutatták, hogy a pozitív gondolkodásmód javítja az idősebb felnőttek mentális és fizikai egészségét. A cikk rávilágít az ősi ayurvédikus tudás és a kortárs tudomány párhuzamosságaira. Hangsúlyozza az idősek bölcsességének tiszteletben tartásának és az öregedés méltóságteljes megélésének fontosságát.

Kulcsszavak: Ayurveda, pozitív idősödés, Rasayana, méltóságteljes öregedés

Introduction

In the present society, most of the times the aging is perceived negatively. The older people are considered as weak, not productive and also resistant to changes. This can lead to discriminatory attitudes like ageism. Aging is also considered as a burden on the society because of their declined cognitive and physical abilities (Chu et al., 2020). It is seen as a problem that involves social and cultural dimensions (Simmons, 1946). With passing time, ageism is becoming more and more evident. It can be described as negative or positive stereotypes, prejudice and/or discrimination against (or to the benefit of) aging people because of their chronological age (Iversen et al., 2009).

The term Ayurveda literally means 'the knowledge of life'. According to WHO, the documented history of Ayurveda from the Indian subcontinent dates back 3500 years (WHO, 2020). Ayurveda considers aging as Swabhava bala pravrutta. That means it is natural process (Sapra & Deole, 2023). And therefore, one need not resist it, as it is inevitable. Of course, there are Rasayana therapies mentioned in Ayurvedic texts that help in healthy aging (Deole & Aneesh, 2021). Aging process can be seen as a positive thing too. A national poll conduct-



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ed in United States on healthy aging explored the prevalence of positive attributes of aging among older adults in a nationally representative sample age 50-80. And the older adults reported that, as they have gotten older, they have become more comfortable with themselves, have a strong sense of purpose, feel more positively about aging, and have found their life to be better than they had thought it would be (Solway et al., 2020). This article is presented with an objective of highlighting the positive attitude towards aging, by focussing on ancient Ayurvedic concepts and supporting modern researches.

Methods

A survey of Ayurvedic writings served as the foundation for this article. Materials about Vaya, aging, and other pertinent subjects have been gathered. The primary Ayurvedic sources utilized in this research include Ashtanga Samgraha, Ashtanga Hridaya, Sushruta Samhita, Charaka Samhita, any accessible comments on these. In order to gather knowledge on the pertinent subjects, we have also consulted contemporary books and looked through several research publications.



source: private archive

Results (Literature review)

The lifespan (vaya/ayu) is divided into 3 phases according to Ayurveda. Childhood (bala), young/middle age (madhya) and old age (vridhdha). The childhood is dominated by Kapha Dosha, middle age by Pitta and old age by Vata. Dry, cold and rough are the qualities of Vata. And that is how in the older age these qualities become dominant leading to signs of aging, e.g., wrinkling of skin, lack of synovial fluid in joints (Sushruta, 2005).

Jara is another common term that is associated with aging in Ayurvedic texts, which is defined as that which has become old by the act of wearing out (Rao, 2018). The symptoms of aging, or Jara, include various physical and mental changes. Some of those are greying of hair (Palita), wrinkling of the skin (Valita) and baldness (Khalithya). Muscles become lax (Mamsa Shaithilya), fat becomes more liquified (Medo Vishyandana) and joints loosen (Sandhimoksha). There is a reduction in strength,

enthusiasm (Nirutsaha) and immunity (Bala), besides a decrease in Ojas (Ojo Kshaya) and potency (Virya). Aging affects the mind too, leading to reduced memory (Nasta Smriti), speech (vachana) and intellect (Budhi). Furthermore, the body becomes more susceptible to disease (Roga Adhishana), and daily activities become more difficult to perform (Asamartha Chesta). Vata Dosha is predominant in this stage of life, causing most of the above-mentioned symptoms (Sisupalan et al., 2022). Even though aging is a natural process, because there is a disturbance in homeostasis, it is considered as a disease (vyadhi). And this is a disease that occurs naturally like hunger, thirst and death (Sastri & Chaturvedi, 1998; Panasikar, 1995). These effects of aging lead to a lower self-esteem in old adults. And serious consequence of this could be depression and suicidal tendency.

In Sanskrit one of the words used to denote an aged person is Vridhdha. The same word has several other meanings including experienced, wise, learned, important, joyful, grown, great, and eminent (Sanskrit Lexicon, 2020). The ancient sages in India divided life into four stages or Ashramas:

1. Brahmacharya Ashram (0-25 years): This is the stage of learning and acquiring knowledge. A student focuses on studies and discipline.
2. Grihastha Ashram (25-50 years): This is the stage where one enjoys life being a householder. The person also takes on family responsibilities, like having a family and raising children. All these can be done while experiencing worldly pleasures.
3. Vanaprastha Ashram (50-75 years): The stage of sharing wisdom and doing social service. By this time, individuals have enjoyed their life. They have also fulfilled most of their family responsibilities. Now, they are encouraged to contribute back to society by extending their care to the larger community beyond their immediate family. From personal gains the focus slowly shifts on to contributing to the betterment of society.
4. Sannyasa Ashram (75-100 years): This is the final stage of life. It is focused on spiritual contemplation and letting go. Individuals meditate, withdraw from worldly attachments, and go inward in pursuit of deeper wisdom. The focus is also on passing wisdom to the younger generation while gradually detaching from social responsibilities and material life (Sharma, 2007).

The study by Erica Solway et al. also found out that nearly 70% of older adults who participated in the study reported that people sought their guidance because of their wisdom and experience. And over half (52%) of those who said their lives were better than they thought reported very good or excellent physical health (Solway et al., 2020).

Positive attributes of aging include: reflection on life's value, engagement in meaningful activities, and increased appreciation for daily life. Being positive enhances aging by promoting mental and physical health. This in turn promotes resilience, and leads to experiences like emotional satisfaction and mindfulness (Killen & Macaskill, 2020).

It is also evident that positive self-perceptions of aging lead to improved functional health over time. This demonstrates that there is a definite role of mindset in

aging. Ageing brings emotional resilience, stronger interpersonal relationships, and accumulated life wisdom. Being positive in older age has been found to be helpful in reducing the impact of stereotypes. This leads to higher self-control, lower stress and improved mental and physical health (Becca et al., 2002).

Positive emotions offer immediate relief. They also help mitigate the physiological harm caused by negative emotions. The effect was particularly visible on the cardiovascular system. This „undoing effect” reduces stress and fosters a cycle of improved emotional health. And this promotes long-term happiness and resilience (Fredrickson, 2003).

Practical applications of Rasayana for aging gracefully

Rasayana is one among the eight limbs of Ayurveda that deal with methods to increase lifespan, delay the aging process, strength, memory, and even pacifying diseases (Sushruta, 2005). Based on the effect, the Rasayana treatment is classified into 3 types as:

1. Kamyas Rasayana: done with an intention to attain specific benefits such as long life, sharper intelligence, etc.
2. Naimittika Rasayana: done with an intention to treat specific diseases like Vatavyadhis (diseases caused due to imbalance of Vata).
3. Ajasrikam: should be followed daily to maintain the best of health (Dalhana, 2005).

So based on the intention, that type of Rasayana can be chosen.



source: www.ayurvedichomeremedies.net

Diet and Herbs:

There is a concept of Nitya sevaniya (daily consumable) food items in Ayurveda. These food items, when consumed regularly, lead to effect similar to Rasayana. And there are Nitya asevaniya (daily-non consumable) food items, which when consumed regularly lead to opposite effects of that of Rasayana (Deshmukh et al., 2019).

Some Rasayana food items are:

- Indian gooseberry (Amalaki)
- Cow's ghee (Goghrita)
- Honey (Madhu)
- Green gram (Mudga)
- Rock salt (Saindhava)
- Rice (Shashtika Shali)
- Barley (Yava)
- Pomegranate (Dadima)
- Wheat (Godhuma)
- Raisins (Mridvika)

Chebolic myrobalan (Pathyaa/Haritaki)

Brown cane sugar (Sharkara)

Out of hundreds of herbs that have Rasayana effect on body, only a few have been studied, have listed a few of them including (Wu et al., 2024):

Tinospora cordifolia (Guduchi)

Phyllanthus emblica (Amalaki)

Terminalia chebula (Haritaki)

Asparagus racemosus (Shatavari)

Tribulus terrestris (Gokshura)

Glycyrrhiza glabra (Yashtimadhu/licorice)

Aloe vera (Kumari)

Withania somnifera (Ashwagandha)

Bacopa monnieri (Brahmi)

Centella asiatica (Gotu kola)

Triphala (a combination of Amalaki, Haritaki, and Bhibhitaki), Ashwagandha and Yashtimadhu had the largest body of evidence (Wu et al., 2024).

Exercises:

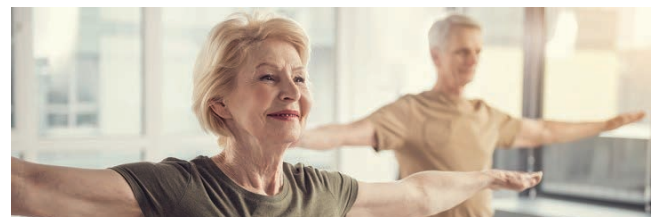
Exercises in Ayurvedic literature is mentioned as Vyayama. Vyayama includes any activities that produce mild to moderate exertion, which in turn imparts stretching of different body parts (Dalhana, 2005). It is said to be one among the best practices to preserve and promote health. The type of exercise has to be chosen according to the age, Ayurvedic body type (Prakriti) of every person and the season. The intensity, frequency and duration of exercises also depends on the aforementioned factors.

Dinacharya:

It is one more special and unique contribution of Ayurveda. Starting from when to get up in the morning till when to sleep at night, all the beneficial and harmful activities that one can indulge in are mentioned in this topic (Anagha & Deole, 2021). Dinacharya is a special daily regimen that when followed properly helps to maintain balance of Vata, Pitta and Kapha, thereby supporting the well-being. It includes special regimens like oil pulling, tongue scraping, self-massage with oil, etc.

Mental and behavioural Rasayana:

Ayurveda lays down principles for a better mental health, they are called as Achara Rasayana. The regimens suggested in Achara Rasayana, include rhythmic chanting (Japa), adhering to a Sattvik diet like cow milk and ghee, and also doing meditation (Dhyana). These regimens have Rasayana effects on the body as well as on mind (Babu et al., 2007). One of the simplest and still profound meditation technique called Sahaj Samadhi Meditation showed promising results in cases of late life depression (Ionson et al., 2019). A breathing technique (Pranayama) called Sudarshan Kriya has shown positive effect on physical and mental parameters (Zope & Zope, 2013).



source: www.greatseniorliving.com

Discussion

In India, where I come from, there is a cultural system that recommends people take care of their aged parents. That way they do not feel lonely, and don't have to face ageism that often. In the past 7 years that I have spent in Hungary, and traveling to several European countries, I have met thousands of people. I got an opportunity to know more about their lives. And I realised that in European countries too, especially in Hungary the cultural practise to take care of your old parents at home is still followed in most of the cases. Aging is usually seen as something negative, something bad. Older people are sometimes seen as a burden or problem for the society because they cannot contribute to the society as a result of their disabilities. And that can lead to subtle or open ageism. But Ayurveda has a different view. It sees aging as a natural process and there is nothing to feel bad about it. And the symptoms of aging are because of natural dominance of Vata during this phase of life. Vata dominance in this phase of life is part of a natural rhythm that takes place in every person's life who lives a complete lifespan. As soon as one sees that aging is a part of nature, there is an immediate sense of acceptance. Terms like Vriddha used in Ayurveda/Sanskrit language has positive meanings indicating wisdom and greatness. Therefore, in Eastern culture utmost respect is given to the elderly people, they are revered.

They are consulted for their advice, with the belief that they have more life-experience than younger ones. One of the commonest routines of elderly people is to tell moral stories to small children. This way they contribute to the society in a very positive way. Concepts of Vanaprastha Ashram and Sannyasa Ashram bring mental and societal preparation for ageing. By the time they reach to the age of 60-70, they have completed most of their social duties. And because there are no many personal desires left in them, it is believed that when old people bless you, their blessings come true. This way they are still an active part of the society. Even the modern scientific surveys have suggested that older adults are considered as wiser and experienced. And they were asked for guidance. As per the positive psychology, positive self-perception brings better physical and mental health which can make older adults feel confident about themselves.

To make aging healthier and graceful, Ayurveda recommends Rasayana therapies. The first chapter of Charaka Samhita, an Ayurvedic Text, starts with the quest to longevity. And thus, things mentioned in the Ayurvedic texts are focussed on prolonging the lifespan. There is a preventive aspect and a curative aspect to Rasayana. Both are with the same aim of prolonging the life. Rasayana is the most important gift that Ayurveda has given to mankind. There are several references in ancient Indian texts that highlight instances where people got their youth back. One such example is Chyavan Maharishi who gained his youth back after consuming Chyavanprash in the Rasayana way (Singh et al., 2020).

Rasayana can be chosen based on the need of an individual. This is because Rasayanas not only have rejuvenation qualities but also curative effect. Anything and everything that influences our life can either be supporting or against the health. Ayurveda helps us to know what is supporting

and what is against. Following the supporting diet, lifestyle, mental and behavioural regimen acts as Rasayana.

Conclusion

We resist the change and that is what creates problems. If only we can see that everything in this universe is changing but there is something inside us that is not changing, that is not getting old then we can be really happy. There is a part in us that never gets old, if we can hold on to that, then we can win over aging in real sense.

Aging can be compared with ripening of a fruit. It is a natural and inevitable process that causes changes in colour (spots on the skin), texture (wrinkles) and makes the fruit delicate and fragile. Same things happen in old age. But at the same time, we should also see that ripened fruits are sweeter, juicier and tastier. In my personal experience and a scientific review that we conducted, it was found out that Sudarshan Kriya shows promising results, similar to Rasayana effect. It makes the mindset of a person becomes positive, towards society and own life as well. Thus, if we start looking at aging from a positive perspective, without being afraid just embrace it, the later phase of life can become happy and fulfilling.



source: private archive

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