

REVIEW ARTICLE

A Review of the Role of *Aahara* for Children's Health and Well-being

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ABSTRACT

Optimal nutrition during childhood is critical for growth, cognitive development, immunity, and overall well-being. The first 1000 days – from conception to 2 years – represent a sensitive period where nutrient adequacy profoundly influences long-term health outcomes. Despite global efforts, malnutrition remains a major public health challenge, with millions of children affected by stunting, wasting, and underweight conditions. In India, childhood undernutrition continues to be a significant concern, underscoring the need for effective interventions. Ayurvedic principles emphasize an age-appropriate and balanced diet (*Aahara*) as central to child health. Classical texts, including the *Kashyapa Samhita*, recommend exclusive breastfeeding during the first 6 months, followed by the gradual introduction of complementary and solid foods tailored to the child's constitution, digestive strength, and environmental factors. Proper nourishment supports body tissues (*Dhatus*), vital energy (*Ojas*), and Dosha balance, while preventing deficiencies and disease. This review integrates Ayurvedic dietary principles with contemporary nutritional guidelines, highlighting the role of parents, families, schools, and communities in promoting healthy eating behaviors. Ensuring balanced nutrition during childhood lays the foundation for lifelong physical, cognitive, and emotional well-being.

1. INTRODUCTION

Nutrition plays a fundamental role in ensuring the proper growth, development, and overall well-being of children. Adequate intake of essential nutrients during the formative years not only supports physical growth and cognitive development but also strengthens the immune system, enhances learning capacity, and lays the foundation for lifelong health and productivity. The early years of life, particularly the first 1000 days – from conception to 2 years of age – are considered a critical window for nutritional interventions, as deficiencies during this period can have long-term and often irreversible effects on physical and mental development (UNICEF, 2023).

Globally, malnutrition remains one of the major public health concerns. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2024), around 148 million children under 5 years are stunted, and 45 million are wasted, primarily due to inadequate nutrition and repeated infections. In India, despite considerable progress, the problem of childhood

malnutrition continues to be significant. As reported in the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5, 2019–21), 35.5% of children under five are stunted, 19.3% are wasted, and 32.1% are underweight.^[1] Furthermore, 6.7 million Indian children are categorized as “zero-food” children – those who did not receive any food during the reference period – placing India among the top three countries globally with the highest number of undernourished children (UNICEF India, 2023).

According to *Kashyapa Samhita*, one of the principal texts of *Kaumarabhritya* (Ayurvedic pediatrics), proper dietary practices play a vital role in maintaining health and supporting growth at every stage of a child's life. The text emphasizes that nourishment (*Aahara*) must be age-appropriate and balanced to ensure physical and mental well-being. In the early months of life, the newborn is entirely dependent on the mother's milk, which serves as the most natural and complete source of nutrition up to 6 months of age. However, as the child grows, breast milk alone becomes inadequate to fulfill the increasing nutritional demands. Therefore, after 6 months, the introduction of complementary or semi-solid foods alongside breastfeeding becomes essential. This transition not only supports optimal growth and development but also helps prevent malnutrition by providing sufficient and suitable dietary supplements.^[2]

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1.1. Aims/Objective

To review the role of *Aahara* for children's health and well-being.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

A review of *Ayurvedic* literature and its corresponding commentaries has been conducted in depth. Peer-reviewed medical publications and textbooks of contemporary medical sciences.

2.1. Conceptual Review

2.1.1. Importance of good diet

In Ayurveda, *Aahara* (diet) is considered the foundation of life and one of the three pillars of health (*Trayopasthambha*), alongside *Nidra* (sleep) and *Brahmacharya* (regulated lifestyle).^[3] The classical texts emphasize that a balanced and wholesome diet is the primary source of energy, strength, and vitality, and plays a crucial role in maintaining physical, mental, and spiritual well-being. *Charaka Samhita* states that "*Aaharasambhava Vastu Sarva Jeevana*," meaning all living beings are sustained by food. Hence, diet is viewed not merely as a means of sustenance but as a form of preventive and curative medicine. Ayurveda considers food as *Mahabhaishajya* – the supreme medicine.^[4] A wholesome diet helps maintain health (*Swasthasya Swasthya Rakshanam*), whereas a corrective diet aids in the management of diseases (*Aturasya Vikara Prashamanam*). Thus, good dietary habits form the cornerstone of preventive health care in Ayurveda, promoting longevity (*Ayushya*), vitality (*Bala*), and harmony between body, mind, and spirit. Complexion, clarity, good voice, long life, understanding, happiness, satisfaction, growth, strength, and intelligence are all established in nutrition.^[5]

A good diet nourishes the *Dhatus* (body tissues), promotes *Ojas* (vital essence), enhances *Agni* (digestive fire), and maintains equilibrium of the *Doshas* (*Vata*, *Pitta*, and *Kapha*). Proper digestion and assimilation of food are essential for the production of energy, immunity, and overall health. On the contrary, improper diet (*Mithya Aahar*) or irregular eating habits lead to *Agni Dushti* (digestive disturbances), formation of *Ama* (toxins), and imbalance of *Doshas*, which ultimately result in disease manifestation.

2.1.2. Classification of Children based on regime of food^[6]

The children are classified into three categories based on the regime of food, namely, *Ksheerapa* (from birth to 1 year), who usually breastfeed. *Ksheerannada* (from age 1–2 years), who takes both breast milk and food. *Annada* (above 2 years of age) who takes food.

2.2. Necessary Nutrients Requirement^[7]

Mentioned in Table 1 and Table 2.

2.3. Diet According to Different Age Groups (*Awastha*) of Children

2.3.1. Ahara in Ksheerapa Avastha

In Ayurveda, *Stanya* (breast milk) is considered equivalent to *Amrita* (nectar) for newborns, and the practice of *Stanyapāna* (breastfeeding) is highly revered. The classical *Acharyas* unanimously recommend exclusive breastfeeding during the initial 6 months of life, as it provides complete nourishment essential for the infant's growth and development. Mother's milk contains the perfect balance of nutrients – fats, proteins, carbohydrates, and cholesterol – tailored to the baby's physiological needs. Beyond its nutritional excellence, it also

strengthens the immune system and protects the infant from various infections and diseases.

In situations where breastfeeding is not possible, Ayurveda advises the use of goat's milk or cow's milk as a substitute, provided it is administered in the correct quantity, hygienically prepared, and without dilution. These alternatives serve as secondary sources of nourishment, ensuring the infant's continued health and well-being in the absence of the mother's milk.^[8]

2.3.2. Aahara in Ksheerannada Awastha

The period from 6 months to 2 years of age is described in Ayurveda as the *Ksheerannada Avastha*, a crucial transitional phase in a child's nutritional development. During this stage, the infant undergoes rapid physical and cognitive growth, which significantly increases energy and nutrient requirements. Since breast milk alone can no longer meet these demands, it should be continued as the primary source of nourishment, supplemented with appropriate complementary foods to ensure balanced nutrition and prevent deficiencies.

Ayurveda recommends performing the *Phalaprashana* and *Annaprashana* rituals after the completion of 6 months, marking the child's gradual adaptation to semi-solid and solid foods. These complementary foods should be light, easily digestible, and rich in nutrients (*Brimhana* in nature). The introduction of new foods must be done sequentially – starting from liquids to semi-solids and then to solids – while considering the child's digestive capacity (*Agnibala*), appetite, tolerance, and teething stage.

2.3.3. Aahara in Annada Avastha

From the age of 2 years onwards, a child enters the *Annada Avastha*, during which the diet primarily transitions to solid foods. At this stage, the child's digestive capacity (*Agnibala*) has matured sufficiently to process a wider variety of foods. The daily diet should include cereals, pulses, vegetables, whole grains, lentils, beans, nuts, seeds, milk, and regionally available seasonal fruits, ensuring a balance of all essential nutrients required for growth and development.

As the child continues to grow, particularly during later childhood and adolescence, there is an increased need for calcium and energy-rich foods. Hence, regular consumption of milk and milk products is strongly encouraged. Moderate intake of oil or ghee is also advised to maintain energy levels and promote tissue nourishment (*Dhatu Pushti*).

Ayurveda recommends that during this stage, children can be gradually introduced to all types of food preparations – *Lehya* (lickable), *Peya* (drinkable), and *Bhojya* (solid foods) – to develop healthy eating habits and ensure comprehensive nourishment. This diverse and wholesome diet forms the cornerstone for building strength, vitality, and immunity in the growing child.^[9]

2.3.4. Chaturvimshati Vikalpa Aahar in Ayurveda^[10]

- *Tasmaat Kaale* (right time)
- *Shuchi* (in a clean environment)
- *Naativilambitam* (not extremely slowly)
- *Naatistokam* (not in less quantity)
- *Satmaye* (congenial)
- *Prachya mukha* (facing toward the east direction)
- *Naatiushnam* (not extremely hot)
- *Naatidravam* (neither very liquid)
- *Matravata* (proper quantity)

- *Tushni* (calmly) *Natisheetam* (not extremely cold)
- *Naatishushkam* (not too dry)
- *Ushna* (hot) *Tanmana* (concentrated)
- *Naatiruksham* (not extremely dry)
- *Naakankshito* (no reluctance over food)
- *Snigdha* (unctuous)
- *Aaswadhyha* (tastefully)
- *Naatisnigdham* (not extremely smooth)
- *Napratanto* (frequent repetition)
- *Avirodhi* (incompatible)
- *Naatidrutam* (not too fast)
- *Naatibahu* (not in large quantity)
- *Naekrasa* (not accustomed to one *Rasa*).

2.4. Factors and Principles Related to Intake of *Hitakara Aahara* (Wholesome Diet)

Mentioned in Table 3.

3. DISCUSSION

Adequate nutrition is essential for the healthy growth, development, and overall wellness of children. Worldwide, malnutrition continues to pose a significant public health challenge, impacting millions of children under the age of five, who suffer from stunting, wasting, and underweight conditions.

Ayurveda highlights the importance of an age-appropriate and balanced diet (*Aahara*) for maintaining health and promoting growth. Exclusive breastfeeding is recommended for the first 6 months, followed by the gradual introduction of complementary foods to meet increasing nutritional demands. Dietary practices are guided by the child's age – *Ksheerapa* (birth–1 year), *Ksheerannada* (1–2 years), and *Annada* (above 2 years)—and consider factors such as constitution, environment, season, and digestive strength. A wholesome diet nourishes body tissues (*Dhatus*), enhances vital energy (*Ojas*), strengthens digestion (*Agni*), and maintains *Dosha* balance, whereas poor nutrition leads to weakness, impaired immunity, and developmental delays.

By integrating these principles, proper nutrition not only prevents malnutrition but also supports strength, intelligence, vitality, and emotional stability, laying the foundation for a healthy and productive life.

3.1. Principles of a Balanced Diet and Its Benefits^[6]

According to Ayurvedic dietary principles, the stomach (*Kukshi*) should be filled in a balanced manner to support optimal digestion and health. It is advised that one-third of the stomach be filled with solid food (*Ashana*), another one-third with liquids, and the remaining one-third left empty to allow for the free movement of *Doshas* and the proper functioning of digestive processes. This proportion ensures that food is digested efficiently without overburdening the *Agni* (digestive fire). Following these dietary guidelines helps maintain good health, vitality, and longevity, while also supporting strength, fertility, efficient metabolism, and overall physical and mental well-being.

The *Bhojankalpa*, *Yushanirdishya*, and *Bhojyopakramaniya* chapters of the *Kashyapa Samhita* provide a detailed exposition of these principles. These sections collectively form a foundational guide to the Ayurvedic science of food and nutrition, highlighting the importance of mindful eating practices in disease prevention and health preservation.

4. CONCLUSION

Childhood constitutes a critical period for the establishment of healthy dietary behaviors. From the perspective of Ayurvedic science, nutrition is the foremost determinant of a child's growth, development, and overall well-being. Parents and caregivers serve as primary agents of influence, shaping children's eating patterns and acting as key regulators of their dietary practices. Furthermore, the promotion of appropriate nutritional behaviors necessitates coordinated efforts across familial, educational, and community settings, ensuring that children internalize and maintain balanced eating habits that contribute to optimal long-term health outcomes.

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6. AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors have contributed equally to conception, design, data collection, analysis, drafting, and final approval of the manuscript.

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8. ETHICAL APPROVALS

This study does not require ethical clearance as it is a review article.

9. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

Nil.

10. DATA AVAILABILITY

This is an original manuscript, and all data are available for review purposes only from the principal investigators.

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Table 1: Necessary nutrients requirement

Age group	Thiamin (mg/day)	Riboflavin (mg/day)	Niacin (mg/day)	Vit B6 (mg/day)	Folate (µg/day)	Vit B12 (µg/day)	Vit C (mg/day)	Vit A (µg/day)	Vit D (IU/day)
Infant									
0–6 months	0.2	0.4	2	0.1	25	1.2	20	350	400
6–12 months	0.4	0.6	5	0.6	85	1.2	30	350	400
Children									
1–3 years	0.7	1.1	7	0.9	120	1.2	30	390	
4–6 years	0.9	1.3	9	1.2	135	1.2	35	510	600
7–9 years	1.1	1.6	11	1.5	170	2.2	45	630	
Boys 10–12 years	1.5	2.1	15	2.0	220	2.2	55	770	600
Girls 10–12 years	1.4	1.9	14	1.9	225	2.2	50	790	600
Boys 13–15 years	1.9	2.7	19	2.6	285	2.2	70	930	600
Girls 13–15 years	1.6	2.2	16	2.2	245	2.2	65	890	600

Table 2: Necessary nutrients requirement after infancy

Group	Age	Protein g/day	Fat g/day	Calcium Mg/day	Iron mg/d	magnesium mg/d	Zinc Mg/d	Iodine µg/day	Net energy kcal/day
Infant	0–6 months	8.0	-	300	-	30	-	100	108/kg
	6–12 months	10.5	-	300	3	75	2.5	130	96/kg
Children	1–3 years	12.5	25	500	8	90	3.3	90	1240
	4–6 years	16.0		550	11	125	4.5	120	1690
	7–9 years	23.0		650	15	175	5.9	120	1950
Boys	10–12 years	32.0	22	850	16	240	8.5	150	2190
Girls	10–12 years	33.0		850	28	250	8.5	150	1970
Boys	13–15 years	45.0	22	1000	22	345	14.3	150	2450
Girls	13–15 years	43.0		1000	30	340	12.8	150	2060

Table 3: Factors and Principles Related to Intake of Hitakara Ahara (Wholesome Diet)

Key factors/principles	Description	Explanation
Factors to be Considered for <i>Hitakara Aahara</i> ^[11]	• <i>Sharrr</i> (body constitution) • <i>Desha</i> (habitat or place of residence) • <i>Prakṛti</i> (individual nature or constitution) • <i>Kala</i> (season and time of intake) • <i>Matra</i> (Quantity of food)	Diet should be chosen according to an individual's body type, environment, seasonal variations, and digestive strength. Proper quantity and compatibility enhance digestion and maintain <i>Doṣha</i> balance.
Proper Sequence of Food Intake ^[12]	• Begin with unctuous and sweet food items (<i>Snigdha</i> and <i>Madhura Rasa</i>) • Consume liquid, cool, and mixed food combinations in the middle • End the meal with pungent, hot, dry, and light items (<i>Kaṭu</i>, <i>Uṣṇa</i>, <i>Rūkṣa</i>, <i>Laghu</i>)	Following this sequence supports efficient digestion and nutrient absorption. The meal order should align with individual tolerance and comfort.
Appropriate Period for Diet Intake ^[13]	• <i>Doshas</i> are balanced and localized in their natural sites • Channels (<i>Srotas</i>) are clear and unobstructed • Genuine appetite and desire for food are present	Food should be consumed only when hunger arises naturally, ensuring proper digestion and assimilation. Eating at the right time maintains <i>Agni</i> (digestive fire) and prevents metabolic disturbances.
Effects of Adequate Nutrition ^[14]	• Enhances <i>Varṇa</i> (luster), <i>Bala</i> (strength), <i>Smṛti</i> (memory), <i>Medha</i> (intelligence), and <i>Ayu</i> (longevity) • Promotes happiness and emotional stability • Maintains physical and mental health • Strengthens sensory organs (<i>Indriyas</i>)	Adequate nutrition ensures vitality, disease resistance, and overall well-being, supporting both body and mind.
Consequences of Inadequate Nutrition ^[15]	• Reduced enthusiasm (<i>Utsaha</i>), complexion (<i>Varṇa</i>), voice quality (<i>Svar</i>), and vision (<i>Drṣṭi</i>) • Emaciation (<i>Karśya</i>), fatigue (<i>Srama</i>), voice disorders (<i>Vak Vikara</i>) • Cardiac discomfort (<i>Hrid Peeda</i>) and facial dullness (<i>Jantur Galani Mukha</i>)	Insufficient or poor-quality diet leads to weakness, loss of vitality, and early onset of physical and sensory decline.