

# The Importance of Oral Health

## Ayurvedic Practices to Support Your Overall Vitality

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Did you know that Ayurveda has a great deal to say about the importance of oral health—and the practice of oral hygiene? We all know that brushing, flossing, and regular dental cleanings are important. But very few of us look forward to going to the dentist, even for routine check-ups. For whatever reason, there is a great deal of fear and shame attached to dentistry, which can mean that, on a cultural scale, oral health receives far less attention than it deserves. But many people find that their oral health improves dramatically when they adopt Ayurvedic oral hygiene practices—which can also help to reduce or eliminate the occurrence of dreaded dental problems like cavities, receding gums, tooth sensitivity, and cracked teeth.

Medical and dental professionals know that our oral health is an important window into our overall health, and that issues in the mouth can (and do) affect the deeper organs and tissues of the body.<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, Ayurveda has acknowledged a link between oral health and overall health for thousands of years—even sharing striking parallels with the revelations of modern science. Prioritizing oral health ensures that our teeth and gums remain as intact as possible, rendering dental visits less scary, less painful, and minimally invasive, while simultaneously supporting robust overall health and well-being. Ayurvedic oral hygiene practices also enhance the sense of taste, support detoxification, encourage optimal digestive strength, and bolster immunity. This resource is meant to dispel any fear or shame that you may have about the condition of your gums, mouth, or teeth, and to empower you with practical tools to support your health—both in the mouth and throughout the body.



# Ayurveda on Oral Health

As you may be aware, *vata*, *pitta*, and *kapha* each have five subtypes that carry out specific physiological functions. One of these subtypes—*bodhaka kapha*—is a primary player in the mouth. Understanding a bit about this particular subtype of kapha offers important insights into the marvels of the oral cavity, and helps to explain why looking after our oral health is so essential to our overall well-being.

## Functions of Bodhaka Kapha

Bodhaka kapha:<sup>2</sup>

- Initiates the first stages of digestion for simple carbohydrates (via enzymes in the mouth).
- Regulates oral bacteria.
- Lubricates oral tissues in order to prevent friction between them.
- Supports speech and the vocal chords.
- Maintains an optimal oral temperature.
- Helps to receive the knowledge of taste.
- Supports immune function, specifically via the tonsils.

A healthy mouth is one in which bodhaka kapha thrives, ensuring that all of its functions can serve our overall health. Conversely, when bodhaka kapha is disordered or imbalanced, it can impact not only our oral health, but also all kapha systems throughout the body.<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, several key kapha sites—namely the pancreas, heart, brain, and joints—are directly correlated with diseases that western medicine has linked to oral health, including diabetes (the pancreas), cardiovascular disease (the heart), Alzheimer’s disease (the brain), and osteoporosis (related to the joints because *shleshaka kapha* in the joints is said to nourish the bone tissue).<sup>4</sup> Ultimately, when we care for our mouths properly, we support all of these deeper organs and tissues, but there is also great potential to negatively impact them, if we neglect our oral health.

## Additional Benefits of Good Oral Health

In truth, robust oral health has incredibly far-reaching benefits; here is a closer look at several of them:

### Enhanced Sense of Taste

Ayurveda places a great deal of emphasis on the sense of taste, describing six unique tastes, each of which is essential to a balanced diet. If the six tastes are new to you, you might appreciate our resource, [The Fundamentals of Taste](#). When a food is ingested and its taste is perceived in the mouth, there is an important cascade of communication that occurs between the mouth and the rest of the digestive tract, preparing the stomach and the intestines for the food that is about to be received. This supports optimal digestion, which Ayurveda views as a cornerstone of perfect health. It should also be noted that the sense of taste—which proper oral health helps to preserve—is crucial not only to our physical health; it is also related to our overall sense of satisfaction in life.



## Bolstered Digestive Strength

There is no question that digestion begins in the mouth. Almost immediately upon ingesting food or drink, enzymes in the mouth itself begin to break down simple carbohydrates and sugars. Simultaneously, the action of chewing manually breaks our foods down into more manageable morsels for the stomach, setting us up for optimal digestion. If these oral functions are impaired in any way, our overall digestive strength is bound to suffer. Issues with the teeth and gums can quickly compromise our ability to chew properly, and other oral imbalances can impact the more subtle chemical interactions that are crucial to these first stages of digestion. By contrast, a healthy mouth promotes optimal intelligence and coordination throughout the oral cavity and beyond.

## Improved Organ and Tissue Health

At the most fundamental level, all of our tissues depend on *agni* (the digestive fire) for nutrition. Agni is responsible for transforming the foods that we ingest into biologically useful substances, which are then made available to cells and tissues throughout the body. As the entry point for the entire digestive tract, the health of the mouth directly impacts the gut, and the strength of agni. Good oral health fosters strength in the digestive tract and supports agni, which in turn affects every cell and tissue throughout the body. And because the tongue shares a direct energetic connection with many of our most vital internal organs, proper oral hygiene actually impacts these deeper tissues far more directly than we might otherwise imagine. Cleansing the tongue is both stimulating and detoxifying for all of the internal organs that are represented on the surface of the tongue. More on that [below](#).

## Understanding Our Teeth

There are a lot of misconceptions out there about our teeth and how they function. We often assume that some of us have been gifted with inherently *good teeth*, while others were not so fortunate. And even worse, when dental problems arise, we rarely look beyond the mouth for an explanation or cause. As a holistic tradition, Ayurveda takes a fundamentally different approach to dental health.

### They're Alive!

Somehow, we often tend to think of the teeth as inert and lifeless. But they are, in fact (except for the enamel) made of living tissues—just like our bones. According to Ayurveda, the teeth are actually a byproduct of the bone tissue, meaning that the health of the teeth can be directly correlated to the health of the bones. And like other tissues, the teeth can be injured, they can become nutrient deficient and depleted, and remarkably, they can also heal. Even cavities (depending on their size) can remineralize—which does not mean that the damaged tooth regrows, but that the decay can be halted and that a strong outer tooth-surface can be reestablished, even after a cavity has formed.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, fillings, crowns, and root canals inherently compromise the integrity of our teeth.<sup>6</sup> While these procedures are sometimes necessary, recognizing that the teeth are largely composed of living tissues allows us to adopt a more holistic approach to preserving their long-term health.

The truth is that in addition to direct influences within the oral cavity (like exposure to excess sugar, acidic foods, or bacterial imbalances), the teeth—like all other tissues—are affected by the quality of our nutrition, our overall health, and our stress levels. So if you are aware of imbalances in your teeth, you might consider working with a



qualified practitioner to determine how you can better support your teeth from the inside out. This whole-bodied approach can complement the oral health strategies we'll discuss here, as well as the care you are receiving from your dentist.

## An Important Site of Vata

Further, the teeth are considered a site of vata, which is a rather delicate *dosha*. Vata does best when it receives deep nourishment, and tender, soothing care. The same is true of the teeth and gums, which should be cared for gently, carefully, and will generally respond well to grounding, nourishing inputs. This is one of the reasons that Ayurvedic oral hygiene practices are so supportive of our oral health; they are gentle, nourishing, and on the whole, deeply supportive of vata. On the other hand, aggressive oral health-care and hygiene practices are bound to be vata-aggravating, and over time will surely negatively impact the teeth and gums.

# A Closer Look at Practices that Promote Oral Health

The following Ayurvedic strategies can be practiced in addition to daily brushing and flossing to promote optimal oral health. We'll help you to understand the benefits of each practice, and cover the practical tools you'll need to get started.

## Tongue Cleaning

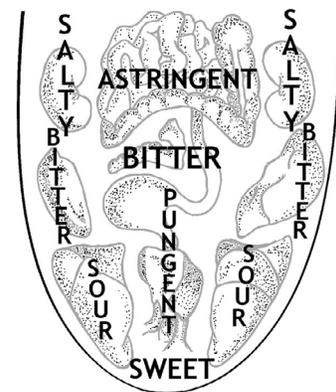
According to Ayurveda, the tongue is connected to—and mirrors the health of—many vital organs throughout the body: the heart, lungs, kidneys, liver, spleen, stomach, small intestine, colon, and so on. In Ayurveda, looking at the tongue is one of several methods for assessing the health of these organs, and scraping the tongue with a [Tongue Cleaner](#) is said to directly impact each of them. Because the tongue is soft and spongy, a firm and inflexible object like a tongue cleaner cleans it far more effectively than a supple entity like a toothbrush. A tongue scraper simply does a superior job of loosening and clearing any accumulations from the folds and grooves of the tongue so that they can be completely eliminated from the mouth.

## Benefits

Using a tongue cleaner daily:

- Improves oral hygiene.
- Clears *ama* (toxins) and bacteria from the tongue.
- Removes the unwanted coating from the tongue.
- Promotes fresh breath.
- Enhances the sense of taste.
- Gently stimulates the internal organs.
- Enriches oral, digestive, and overall health.
- Encourages daily awareness of one's current state of health as reflected via the tongue.

TONGUE: RELATED TASTES & ORGANS



## How to Practice

Ayurveda recommends using a tongue cleaner at the start of each day, on an empty stomach. To practice, hold the ends of the tongue cleaner in both hands, open the mouth and extend the tongue over a sink. Place the curved edge of the tongue cleaner on the rear surface of the tongue, as far back as is comfortable. Press down gently on the surface of the tongue, and pull the tongue cleaner forward, removing the unwanted coating. Rinse the tongue cleaner with warm water and repeat three to five times, or until the tongue is free of coating and feels fresh and clean. For added benefit, add up to ten additional strokes to further stimulate the internal organs and support healthy digestion and elimination. But be gentle. The tongue should not bleed or develop soreness from this practice. If your tongue is sensitive at first, start with fewer strokes and gradually build up to more. For a quick-reference resource on this practice, please see our handout on [Tongue Cleaning](#).



## Oil Pulling

Oil pulling is the practice of swishing with about a tablespoon of oil in the mouth—for up to twenty minutes. As the oil is swished around the mouth and between the teeth, it contacts tissues throughout the oral cavity, introducing them to a very nourishing, soothing substance. Oil is, by its very nature, deeply vata-pacifying. It is heavy, often warm, liquid, and well, oily—all qualities that soothe and balance vata. An herbalized oil can introduce even more supportive qualities and offer additional benefits to the tissues of the mouth. Banyan's oil pulling oil, [Daily Swish](#), is formulated in a base of sesame and coconut oils, infused with [Triphala](#), [Guduchi](#), and [Fennel](#) for their oral health benefits, and flavored with a refreshing blend of peppermint and spearmint essential oils. It is a potent blend for maximizing the positive effects of oil pulling.

All oil shares a natural affinity with the lipid-based cell membranes on the exterior of a cell—including those of the many single-celled microorganisms that inhabit the mouth. When these microbes come in contact with oil, their cell membranes naturally adhere to the oil, which helps to detach them from the teeth and gums, supporting



the removal of plaque, and odor-causing bacteria, while helping to protect against oral microbe imbalances, and the diseases these imbalances can cause.<sup>7</sup> [Coconut Oil](#), in particular, is known to help maintain a healthy balance of microbes in the mouth.<sup>8</sup>

Swishing the oil for up to twenty minutes also engages a wide array of muscles in and around the mouth. As individuals who practice oil pulling can attest, these are muscles that do not often get exercised in quite this way. The activity strengthens and tones the muscles themselves (which has its own benefits) while simultaneously increasing circulation to the entire area, thereby supporting both the nourishment and detoxification of the oral tissues.

## Benefits

Oil pulling:

- Encourages fresh breath.
- Maintains normal oral pH.
- Promotes balance in oral microbes.
- Prevents plaque build-up.
- Encourages strong, healthy teeth and gums.
- Increases circulation to the oral tissues.
- Supports natural bodily detoxification mechanisms.
- Bolsters digestive health by supporting oral health (where the GI tract begins).

## How to Practice

In the morning, on an empty stomach, place about 1 tablespoon of [Coconut Oil](#), [Sesame Oil](#), or [Daily Swish](#) in your mouth. Swish the oil from side to side, front to back, and all around the teeth, gums, and cheeks—being mindful to also “pull” the oil between the teeth. Continue swishing in this way for up to twenty minutes, or until the oil has become thin and whitish in color. Spit out the oil (do not swallow it) and rinse with warm water. If desired, you can brush the teeth afterwards. Many recommend disposing of the oil in a lined trashcan rather than a sink, in order to prevent the oil from accumulating in your pipes.

## Triphala Tea

[Triphala](#) is an ancient Ayurvedic formula consisting of dried herbs from three fruits: [Amalaki](#), [Bibhitaki](#), and [Haritaki](#). Triphala is *tridoshic*, so it balances vata, pitta, and kapha. It has a unique ability to nourish and rejuvenate the tissues while simultaneously cleansing and detoxifying the system. These qualities enhance oral health in much the same way that they bolster digestive strength. Triphala tea (made from [Triphala powder](#)) can be taken internally to support the entire digestive tract, but it can also be swished in the oral cavity to help maintain the health of bodhaka kapha.<sup>9</sup> In fact, one study found that, among healthy adolescent boys, swishing with a decoction of triphala was as effective as chlorhexidine in maintaining the health of the teeth, gums, and the oral cavity.<sup>10</sup> Triphala also contains five of the six tastes (all but salty), and exposure to all six tastes is an important aspect of a balanced diet.



## Benefits

Swishing with triphala tea:

- Preserves the proper health and function of bodhaka kapha.
- Supports the body's natural detoxification processes.
- Stimulates and enhances the sense of taste.
- Gently cleanses and nourishes the tissues of the oral cavity.
- Encourages saliva to be thin and liquid rather than thick and viscous (which can cause problems).<sup>11</sup>



## How to Practice

Place ½ teaspoon [Triphala powder](#) in a glass of freshly boiled water. Let it steep for one minute, cool, and then strain the triphala powder out and swish the tea throughout the mouth. When finished, spit out the tea and rinse.

# An Ayurvedic Oral Hygiene Routine

Many people like to brush their teeth and cleanse their mouths *after* eating breakfast so that their mouths feel clean and fresh when they leave the house. But Ayurveda recommends cleansing and nourishing the mouth first thing upon waking. The Ayurvedic approach makes sense for a number of reasons. First, sleep is a natural time for detoxification. Upon waking, our mouths reveal a great deal of evidence that the body was busy detoxing while we slept. There may be “morning breath,” a coating of ama on the tongue (though it will be thin and light, if the body is not burdened with accumulating ama), or just a simple awareness that the mouth feels different upon waking than it does at other times of day. Keep in mind that saliva naturally kills bacteria.<sup>12</sup> And as we know, our mouths are home to a diverse array of microbes, so as we sleep, some of the oral bacteria that comes in contact with our saliva will inevitably die.

## Upon Waking

A thorough cleansing of the oral cavity upon waking clears out this dead and decaying matter, and prevents it from entering the lower digestive tract (where it could place an unnecessary burden on other bodily detoxification mechanisms). But cleansing the mouth first thing also serves to awaken the internal organs and the digestive capacity for the day—which, like a morning stretch, can improve bodily health and functioning throughout the day. At a minimum:

- Scrape your tongue with a [Tongue Cleaner](#),
- Brush your teeth,
- And rinse with warm water.

If you want to do more, consider the addition of [oil pulling](#).



## First Food and Drink for the Day

After cleansing the mouth, consider drinking some warm water before you eat anything: 1-4 cups, depending on your constitution and your preferences. This helps to cleanse the digestive tract, hydrates the tissues after an overnight fast, and serves to further awaken the digestive capacity (whereas cold water can dampen the strength of the digestive fire). Wait ten to twenty minutes, depending on the amount of water, so that it can clear the stomach, and then enjoy your breakfast. Most find that their mouths continue to feel very clean after eating because they have offered such deep, cleansing support at the start of the day. Once awake, our mouths are quite adept at maintaining a clean, healthy environment throughout the day. If this is not the case for you, there may be a deeper underlying imbalance at play that should be addressed, and it would be good to consult with a qualified practitioner.

## Before Bed

It is not necessary to scrape the tongue twice per day. In fact, doing so can be overly aggressive and can harm the delicate tissues of the tongue. Before bed, flossing and brushing the teeth thoroughly is usually sufficient. Dental professionals recommend brushing gently for at least two minutes to thoroughly clean the teeth and gums. So to recap, before bed:

- Floss your teeth,
- Brush your teeth,
- And rinse with warm water.

If you want to do more, consider swishing with [triphala tea](#).

## Navigating Your Next Steps

One thing is certain: tending to our oral health has profound and far-reaching impacts on the entire system. If these Ayurvedic practices are entirely new to you, consider starting with just one new addition at first. Over time, you can gradually incorporate as many practices as you like. If you feel especially drawn to one of the above-mentioned practices, start there. The reality is that anything we do to improve oral health and hygiene is likely to benefit the entire system—from the oral tissues themselves, to the GI tract, to the deeper tissues that are correlated with our oral health. Start where you are. Follow your own sense of inspiration. This is your journey, and your body will likely respond far more enthusiastically to those practices that you feel inspired to try. There are no *shoulds* here. Just ample opportunity to incorporate whatever pieces of ancient wisdom most resonate with you.



## References

- <sup>1</sup> “Oral Health: A Window to Your Overall Health,” *Mayo Clinic*, 11 May, 2013, <http://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/adult-health/in-depth/dental/art-20047475?pg=1>.
- <sup>2</sup> Vasant Lad, *Textbook of Ayurveda Volume 1: Fundamental Principles of Ayurveda* (Albuquerque: The Ayurvedic Press, 2002), 72-3.
- <sup>3</sup> Lad, *Textbook 1: Fundamental Principles*, 73.
- <sup>4</sup> “Oral Health: Overall Health,” *Mayo Clinic*.
- <sup>5</sup> Judene Smith (married name: Judene Benoit, DDS), “The Disturbing Trend of Minimally Invasive Dentistry,” *The Healthy Home Economist*, accessed 16 Jan, 2016. <http://www.thehealthyhomeeconomist.com/minimally-invasive-dentistry-disturbing-trend/>.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>7</sup> Colleen Oakley, “Should You Try Oil Pulling?” *WebMD*, accessed 8 Feb, 2016. <http://www.webmd.com/oral-health/features/oil-pulling>.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>9</sup> Lad, *Textbook 1: Fundamental Principles*, 73.
- <sup>10</sup> Neeti Bajaj and Shobha Tandon, “The Effect of Triphala and Chlorhexidine Mouthwash on Dental Plaque, Gingival Inflammation, and Microbial Growth.” *International Journal of Ayurveda Research*, 2, no. 1 (Jan-Mar 2011): 29-36.
- <sup>11</sup> Lad, *Textbook 1: Fundamental Principles*, 73.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 257.

