

Balancing Vata

In this document I want to share with you some simple yet profoundly effective tools and techniques for balancing Vata. These are the same kind of techniques that we routinely use in our clinic when we see people experiencing symptoms that are consistent with a Vata imbalance.

As we have previously discussed, Vata is responsible for the proper functioning of the nervous system (amongst other things).

When our nervous system becomes unbalanced, it is the same as saying Vata has become unbalanced.

Unfortunately, the Western World in which we live is incredibly unbalancing for the nervous system. We are subjected to virtually non-stop sensory stimulation from TVs, radios, internet, emails, social media, phone notifications, electro-magnetic energy, blue light, over-work, poor sleep, high stress, financial worries ad infinitum.

All of these factors conspire to move the body into a state of “sympathetic nervous system overdrive.” The sympathetic nervous system is what controls our fight or flight response. When we are in a fight or flight response, our bodily function changes; our blood is saturated with stress hormones, our inflammatory markers go up (the precursor to most chronic illnesses), slows and our immune system become impaired. This is done so that the body can divert more blood, oxygen and energy to our brain and muscles so that we can more effectively think about, plan for, fight against and/or run away from danger.

Being in a fight or flight state is fine for short periods of time but when this become chronic it lays the foundation for most forms of chronic disease.

Being in this state also grossly aggravates Vata Dosha which can often leave us feeling:

- Tense
- Anxious
- Stressed
- Restless
- Unsettled
- Fearful
- Unable to sleep
- Fatigued
- Overwhelmed
- Hyperactive
- Unable to concentrate
- Unable to “switch off”
- Like we are chronically multi-tasking
- Digestive upsets
- Constipated

For more details about the common symptoms that are indicative of a Vata aggravation, please refer to the “Introduction to Vata Dosha” document which is available on the Ayurvedic Mentor webpage.

Thus when we find ourselves presenting with a Vata imbalance or if we are going through a time of stress, disruption or turmoil that is leaving us experiencing any of the above symptoms, it is really important to have a selection of powerful self-care tools to turn to.

These are tools that help to down-regulate nervous system activity and switch us from harmful sympathetic overdrive into healing para-sympathetic overdrive.

The para-sympathetic system is the opposite of the sympathetic system and is sometimes called the “rest, heal and digest” system. This is because when in a healing state of para-sympathetic overdrive, our body senses that it is in a place that is safe, calm and protected. This means that stress levels drop and the blood is saturated with calming, mood elevating “feel-good” hormones such as oxytocin and the endorphins. Our inflammatory markers drop (a key preventative factor for chronic illness) and our immune function is optimised, as is our digestive function. This means that we digest more effectively and extract more vitamins, minerals and nutrients from the food we eat which is an important foundation of optimal health.

In essence, the more time we spend in para-sympathetic overdrive each day, the happier, healthier and more contented we become. This is because through doing so we are existing in a state of optimal balance and homeostasis. This is the same as saying we are existing in a state of balanced Vata.

The following provides an overview of a wide selection of medicated oils, herbal medicines, lifestyle practices, meditations and foods that can and should be utilised whenever we feel ourselves to be in a state of fight or flight response.

1. Lifestyle Practices

i. Self-massage and medicated oils: As discussed during the free 5-Day Ayurvedic Challenge, self-massage is a profoundly effective self-care technique that has a particular affinity for balancing Vata. The warm oil that is used as part of the self-massage helps to reduce Vata by antidoting the cold and dry qualities that are inherent within Vata whilst the slow grounding strokes of the massage help to “stabilise” the mobile nature of Vata. Aside from this, self-massage forces us to stop, slow down and ground ourselves. It is proven to switch us from a state of fight or flight into the healing state of para-sympathetic overdrive whilst flooding the body with calming, feel good hormones. As such, self-massage really is an essential self-care practice to prioritise when we see an aggravation of Vata in ourselves.

To perform a self-massage simply take some warm pure oil such as coconut oil, sesame oil or a medicated herbal oil (see below) and massage this into your feet, legs, torso (only ever in an anticlockwise direction over the stomach), hands, arms, neck and shoulders. Use slow, grounding and calming strokes and try to make the self-massage an act of introspection and mindfulness where you connect fully with your body. Ideally try to make the massage last for a minimum of 3-5 minutes and longer when possible.

The Vata balancing benefits of self-massage can be further enhanced by using a powerful Ayurvedic medicated herbal oil called Mahanarayan oil. This oil helps to calm the nervous system, elevate mood, and boost immunity whilst acting as a general tonic for the whole body. When Mahanarayan is applied to the skin during self-massage, the chemically active herbal constituents within the oil penetrate into the nerve endings and capillaries below the top layer of the skin (the epidermis) to induce a body wide impact. Mahanarayan oil can be purchased here if needed:

<https://www.mind-body-medical.co.uk/shop/mahanarayan-oil>

ii. Natural Immersion: There is a famous Vedic saying which is that “the doctor guides but nature heals.” The healing properties of nature have been known and used since time immemorial and robust scientific evidence now supports this notion. For example, research into the Japanese concept of Forest Bathing shows that time spent in solitude in nature elevates moods, boosts immunity, reduces the secretion of stress hormones, lowers anxiety, boosts energy and makes us feel more connected within ourselves. Thus as a Vata balancing technique, few things provide the breadth of benefits as time spent in the quietude of nature.

This could simply be going for a mindful walk in a beautiful natural setting, sitting on a bench or forest floor and losing ourselves in the view or virtually any other approach so long as it cultivates a sense of mindfulness and calmness whilst immersed in the beauty of the natural world.

The concept of a “sit-spot” is also gaining huge traction at the moment. This is a location that you create in your garden, patio or even balcony that is quiet, calming and relaxing. Ideally it will be close to trees or plants. Try to make this spot aesthetically pleasing and somewhere that has that special “feel” to it that makes you unwind and feel at peace. The aim then is simply to sit in this spot for as long as is needed each day to help you to relax and re-balance the nervous system. We implemented this approach several years ago in our garden and can’t emphasise enough the impact it has had; we highly recommend it!

iii. Watch the Sunrise: This is a classical Vedic approach for inducing balance and optimising wellness by tapping into the healing properties of the sun. The sun has been valued as a powerful force of energy right back to the dawn of civilization. In the Vedic tradition, the rising sun is a powerful source of Prana or energy that helps to elevate mood and consciousness, balance Vata and move us into a powerful state of homeostasis.

There is definitely a special quality about the pre-dawn period of the day, a sense of tranquility and calm and being awake at this time helps to infuse us with the same qualities. Thus if you are feeling overwhelmed, stressed or anxious, or feel like you have a Vata imbalance in the general sense, simply aim to be up and awake before sunrise, make yourself a warming cup of tea, rug up with a warm jumper or coat and ideally be outside as the first rays of the sun herald the start of the new day. As the sun rises, practice deep, diaphragmatic breaths to fill the body with the Pranic energy of the new day’s sun; you will be surprised at the restorative effects this can have!

iv: Aromatherapy: Aromatherapy is a fantastic, clinically proven and incredibly quick means of restoring balance to the nervous system and alleviating Vata based aggravations.

Aromatherapy works by making use of the olfactory nerves in the nose. The olfactory nerves are unique in as much as they are the only nerves in the body that are directly exposed to the outside world. Thus when we breathe in smells, the molecules that make up any given aroma are transferred to nerves impulses in the olfactory nerves which then carry the scent into the brain. This explains why certain smells can trigger such powerful memories such as the smell of sun cream reminding us of summer holidays or fresh cut grass reminding us of our childhood. This is simply olfactory nerve activation of the brain’s memory centers.

Aromatherapy taps into this same mechanism but in a healing capacity. By using essential oils that are, by their nature, Vata pacifying, we can very quickly bring balance directly into nervous system via the olfactory nerves to help reduce Vata imbalances.

There are many essential oils that are inherently Vata pacifying but some of the best ones include lavender, clary sage, clove, rose and orange.

To use these essential oils, add 10-12 drops of your chosen oil into a bowl of hot (not boiling) water or a diffuser and allow the vapors to diffuse around the room.

Another option (which is particularly good for Vata balancing) is to use the essential oils as a form of steam therapy. You can do this by adding a few drops of essential oil to a hot flannel and leaving the flannel on the shower floor; the aroma will diffuse around the whole shower cubicle whilst you are washing for a powerful nervous system balancing experience. This is particularly true as hot showers and baths are incredibly Vata balancing as their “hot and wet” qualities reduce the “cold and dry” qualities of Vata.

v. Maintain A Regular Routine: This is perhaps the most important lifestyle practice to embed when you are feeling unbalanced. When the nervous system doesn't know what is coming up, it leads to uncertainty which is perceived (evolutionary speaking) as a threat. This in turn activates the fight or flight response which leads to nervous system imbalances and further Vata aggravation.

The easiest way to nullify this problem is to impose a more structured daily routine. Focus on getting up at the same time each morning, eating at the same times each day and going to bed at the same time each evening. This is one of the most effective long-term approaches for balancing Vata and keeping ourselves balanced and centered.

vi: Elevate Nitric Oxide Levels Through Pranayama: Nitric oxide is a naturally occurring chemical in the body, the discovery of which won the Nobel Prize in 1998. Nitric Oxide has been called the “Panacea of Health and Longevity” due to the all-encompassing health benefits it mobilises. For more detailed guidance on the benefits of nitric oxide and how to increase circulating levels in the blood, please check out the following video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OljnVfU5pJU>

2. Herbal Medicines

Herbal medicines provide a profoundly effective, evidence-based and time-tested way to support our nervous systems during times of stress and emotional dysfunction and to help re-balance Vata. They come with the added benefit of being simple and quick to take, are incredibly safe and typically induce noticeable gains very quickly.

We are huge advocates of the home herbalist movement which is all about educating and empowering people to use herbal medicines safely and effectively in the home to keep family, friends and loved ones in optimal health. As such, one of the key objectives of the Ayurvedic Mentor is to equip our members with a growing library of resources, workbooks, videos and remedy guides that will allow you to become competent, confident and effective home herbalists (indeed, the May theme for the Ayurvedic Mentor is all about kitchen herbal alchemy and how to turn common store cupboard herbs into powerful herbal remedies; more information on this will be released later this month).

However, in the context of balancing Vata, below you will find a brief overview of a core collection of herbs that are wonderful tonics for the nervous system and for balancing out and alleviating the symptoms of Vata aggravations:

- **Ashwaghandha:** This truly exceptional herbal medicine is called the “King of Ayurvedic Medicine” for the broad and powerful benefits it affords. It is truly one of the most exceptional nerve tonics in the global herbal formulary. Turn to Ashwagandha whenever there is anxiety, stress, depression, over-work, panic attacks, nervous exhaustion, insomnia, ruminations, fear, tension, neurosis, excessive thinking and hyperactivity. As an adaptogen, it helps buffer against stress by balancing stress hormones to provide a sense of calmness and clarity. It is also an exceptional immune tonic, helping to optimally balance immune function, prevent cyclical infections, remedying general states of being run down, improving energy and preventing respiratory infections. It is regarded as the most important Vata pacifying herb in Ayurveda and as such is one that we should always have to hand in our home herbal dispensary. It is safe for long term use and is a wonderful collective antidote to the stressors and strains of modern life. An optimal daily dose is between 1000mg-2000mg per day but higher doses can be taken during times of greater stress. Consult a qualified professional before taking Ashwaghandha if you are pregnant, breast feeding or if you are taking thyroid medications. Organic certified Ashwaghandha can be purchased here: <https://www.mind-body-medical.co.uk/shop/organic-ashwaghandha-capsules>
- **Cinnamon:** A wonderfully warming and sweet herb that is highly valued in Ayurveda for its mood elevating and Vata pacifying properties. It possesses effective adaptogenic properties that help buffer against the damaging effects of stress, anxiety, tension and overwhelm whilst elevating mood and calmness. It is also a powerful digestive tonic that can help alleviate the typical digestive symptoms that often accompany Vata aggravations such as distension, bloating, cramping and colic pain. Milk (dairy or non-dairy) is a fantastic way of carrying the healing properties of cinnamon into the body, so add ½ - 1 teaspoon of cinnamon to a cup of warm milk sweetened with a little raw honey and a pinch of nutmeg to induce deeper sleep or mix a good teaspoon into your porridge or smoothie to calm and balance you for the coming day.
- **Valerian:** One of the most famous and well-known tonic herbs for the nervous system that has been used for thousands of years to soothe and alleviate emotional distress and Vata aggravations. It should be one of the first herbs to turn to when suffering from anxiety, low mood, tension, restlessness, nervousness, agitation, irritability, panic attacks, stress, depression and nervous tension. It is also incredibly helpful in the treatment of insomnia and sleep dysfunction, particularly when there is a nervous, ruminative or emotional cause, such as during Vata aggravations. Valerian excels in the management of stress and tension headaches, and can help to alleviate cardiovascular symptoms such as palpitations when these are due to stress and overwhelm. For those of you taking part in our Community Medicinal Herb Garden project, you will know that

Valerian was one of the herbs that we strongly recommended growing, for these very reasons. We will therefore be covering the clinical indications and uses of Valerian in more detail later this year. However, at this point in time, Valerian makes a fantastic herbal tea which is very easy to source. It can also be taken in capsule and liquid forms at a dose of around 250mg-300mg three to four times per day. Valerian should not be used for prolonged periods of time and use cautiously and with careful monitoring alongside anti-depressant, anti-anxiety or sedative drugs.

- **Rosemary:** Another herb that we recommend you all grow is rosemary. This incredibly versatile herb has so many health benefits but in this capacity we will focus on its nervous system balancing properties. Rosemary helps to elevate mood, increase concentration, alertness, focus, memory, cognitive performance and psychometric ability. It also excels in the management of stress, anxiety, depression, cognitive and emotional fatigue and insomnia and as such is an incredibly accessible and easy to use herb that excels in reducing Vata based aggravations. All of these benefits are believed to be due to rosemary's ability to increase blood flow, and therefore nutrient delivery, to the brain. Rosemary contains high levels of volatile oils and as such is perfect to make strong herbal teas out of. To do so, simply add 2 teaspoons of fresh rosemary into a cup, pour on boiling water and add honey to taste. Sip 4-6 cups per day when you notice Vata based aggravations developing. Rosemary also blends very well with valerian so you can combine the two together if needed. Rosemary also makes an excellent medicated herbal bath. To make this, add 1 cup full of fresh rosemary leaves into a bowl and pour over a pint of boiling water and leave to infuse for 15-20 minutes. Place a lid or plate over the bowl to prevent the oils escaping. Once 20-minutes have passed, strain the water through a sieve into another bowl and then pour this strong rosemary infusion into a hot bath and stir vigorously to disperse it. Then simply remain and relax in the bath for at least 15 minutes but ideally longer. For further Vata pacification, you could listen to calming music, chanting or a guided meditation.
- **Tulsi:** The last herbal medicine that I would like to cover in this context is Tulsi. Known as the "incomparable one" in Ayurveda due to its myriad health benefits, it excels in managing the emotional and psychological symptoms of Vata based aggravations. The natural chemicals found in Tulsi leaves help to reduce circulating stress hormones and increase the secretion of our calming feel good hormones. This results in us feeling calmer, more relaxed and less stressed. As such it is a fantastic herb to turn to whenever we are feeling overwhelmed, anxious, deflated, sad, stressed, worried or fearful. It also helps improve sleep by reducing ruminations and slowing down a racing mind. Tulsi leaves have a wonderful flavour and thus make excellent herbal teas. If you are growing them as part of the Community Medicinal Herb Garden project then once the plant is established, simply pick 2 teaspoons of fresh leaves and pour over boiling water. However, whilst we are waiting for the plants to grow, Pukka make a fantastic tea blend called "Three Tulsi" which I thoroughly recommend buying. You can also get Tulsi in capsule form which provides a very easy means of obtaining the benefits of this remarkable herb. Simply take around 2000mg per day.

3. Yoga Sequences

Yoga, as the sister science of Ayurveda, provides a powerful framework for balancing Vata aggravations and restoring a sense of calmness and centeredness to the nervous system. To a degree, all slow yoga is Vata balancing as the stillness inherent to static yoga asanas or poses helps to nullify the mobile qualities of Vata.

However, there are several poses that are particularly effective. These include:

- Mountain pose
- Standing forward bend
- Child's pose
- Hero pose
- Warrior 1 and Warrior 2
- Pyramid pose
- Downward facing dog
- Tree pose
- Supine twist

Aim to practice several of these poses for several minutes each per day. Alternatively, there are a wide selection of Vata balancing yoga sequences freely available on YouTube. Better still, talk to your yoga teacher if you have one to see if they can customise a sequence for you.

4. Dietary Modifications

Modifying our diet is a very effective way of balancing Vata during times of aggravation. We will be devoting a whole month of the Ayurvedic Mentor to better understanding Ayurvedic nutrition later this summer but for now I want to focus on the types and qualities of food that we should prioritise whenever we feel ourselves to be out of balance or notice Vata like symptoms developing.

- The first priority is to establish and comply to regular meal times eaten at the same time each day.
- It is also really important to view eating as something sacred rather than another thing to get done. Where possible, try to prepare your food slowly and when it is ready sit down and enjoy it mindfully without any external stimulation competing for our attention such as TVs, phones, radios et cetera. Doing so not only relaxes and calms us but also enhances digestion which means we extract more nutrients from the food we eat.
- Try to increase the consumption of foods that are warming, heavier, nourishing and easy to digest. These are the types of healthy comfort food we often crave when feeling down such as hearty soups, casseroles, stews, pasta dishes et cetera.
- Try to use lots of heart healthy oils as these excel at balancing Vata. The best option for this is ghee which is a true superfood. Other great options include extra-virgin olive oil and coconut oil. You should be eating these on a daily basis during times of Vata aggravation.

- As a priority, try to minimize or cut out altogether raw, cold and uncooked foods such as salads, cold smoothies, raw vegetables et cetera; these are some of the most Vata aggravating foods available to us.
- Also try to reduce dry and hard to digest foods such as crackers, oat cakes and rice crackers as these can exacerbate the dryness of Vata and increase the likelihood of developing Vata based digestive symptoms.
- **Dairy:** Dairy is excellent for when you are experiencing Vata aggravations, either cow, goat or sheep milk and also nut milks such as almond or cashew nut milk.
- **Grains:** These are “heavy” foods that can really help to balance out the mobile nature of Vata. Favour wholegrain rice, pasta and breads.
- **Vegetables:** All vegetables are very good and healthy for balancing Vata, but ensure they are cooked and ideally spiced with herbs that help digestion such as fennel, black pepper, coriander, rosemary, thyme, sage and cumin. The only real exception to this rule is try to reduce and avoid vegetables such as cabbage and sprouts which are very gassy and can unbalance Vata.
- **Fruits:** Most fruits are good for Vatas but avoid having apples and pears raw (unless they are very sweet); the best option is to gently stew them first. Heavier fruits such as bananas, avocados, mangoes and peaches are excellent.
- **Herbs and Spices:** Use freely and abundantly, favoring fresh ginger, pepper, cinnamon, cardamom, garlic, cloves, rosemary, salt, turmeric, cumin and mint.
- **Legumes:** Can on occasions be hard to digest, so opt for soaked mung beans and red lentils whenever you are feeling unbalanced or notice Vata based symptoms.
- **Animal Protein:** Fish, white meat and eggs are excellent forms of animal protein for Vatas but try to avoid the harder to digest red meats.

Vata Reducing Ojas Tonic

This is absolutely one of the best tonic preparations to calm down a hyperactivated nervous system, reduce Vata and lower stress, anxiety and tension. We drink this regularly whenever we find ourselves moving into a state of fight or flight, particularly in the evening before bed to facilitate a deep and restful sleep. It also tastes great which helps!

Instructions

1. Add the following ingredients to one cup of full fat (ideally non-homogenized) milk (or a non-dairy milk equivalent) and blend in a food blender or nutri-bullet until liquidized.

- Chopped dates (1 tbsp)
- Chopped almonds (2 tsp)
- Coconut oil (1 tbsp)
- Ghee (1-2 tsp)
- Cardamom powder (1/8 tsp)

2. Pour the mixture into a saucepan and bring to the boil and then simmer for 2-3 minutes.

3. Remove from the heat and add in 1 teaspoon (or empty two 500mg capsules) of Ashwaghandha powder into the drink

4. Pour into a cup, add 1 tsp of *raw honey*

5. Enjoy!

Summary

In conclusion, the above provides a framework of approaches to turn to, adopt and embed whenever you find yourself feeling stressed, anxious or unbalanced. These approaches are proven to help move the body into a healing state of para-sympathetic overdrive and therefore balance out any Vata aggravations.

Thus whenever you see any Vata based symptoms developing, aim to experiment with the above approaches to find the ones that you like most and work best to re-balance you. Once you know this, you will have a powerful self-care routine to turn to help optimise your health and keep you balanced to prevent ill health setting in. Good luck!