

Total Health

Deep Detox

Ayurvedic expert Carrie Demers, MD, answers your questions about health and wellness.

By Carrie Demers, MD

Q: Lately, I've been feeling sluggish, drowsy, and mildly depressed but I can't figure out why. What's wrong with me?

A: According to ayurveda, sluggishness, drowsiness, and depression are signs of low agni. Agni is the Sanskrit word for fire. It is generally used to describe our digestive fire, which resides in our solar plexus. Agni's job is to help us digest and assimilate the nutrients in our food, and to support the cleansing organs, including the skin, liver, and kidneys, to move the waste out of our body. But agni is more than this. I like to think of it as a little potbelly stove—the center of our “house” (or body). Our digestion, as well as our immunity, vitality, and clarity of mind, depend on it.

When agni is strong, you have a healthy appetite, a high tolerance for cold weather, plenty of energy, and a strong resistance against colds, flus, and other illnesses. But when agni is weak, you may experience bloating and indigestion, constipation or diarrhea, internal coldness, compromised immunity, and fatigue or a generalized lack of vitality. What's more, when agni is low, you cannot metabolize your food efficiently, and that imperfect process generates ama (“undigested residue” or toxins). From an ayurvedic perspective, this could be the source of your problem.

Q: What can I do to detoxify and revitalize my body?

A: You can strengthen your agni in four simple ways: aerobic exercise, a targeted hatha yoga practice, healthy dietary changes, and detoxifying herbs. Let's start with exercise.

Ideally, you should move your body every day. But I recommend exercising at least five to six times a week for 30 minutes. Choose an activity you enjoy, such as swimming, biking, or dancing—anything that gets your heart pumping. Also, do some hatha yoga practices that strengthen your solar plexus and digestive fire, such as [agni sara](#) (the abdominal squeeze and lift), twisting poses, forward and backward bends, leg lifts, and crunches. But don't make your hatha practice just another thing you have to get done in your day. Hatha yoga is about moving with the breath, being present, and surrendering; it is supposed to prepare us for our inner work—it's not just another form of exercise.

Create a sustainable movement schedule according to your capacity and amount of free time. For instance, on a work day, I do 10 to 15 minutes of hatha in the morning, walk at lunch for 45 minutes, and then just before bed I do some yoga practices that help me wind down and meditate. You'll need to practice in a way that works for you.

Third, eat fresh nourishing foods, including whole grains, fruits, beans, and cooked vegetables (raw vegetables are harder to digest) prepared with small amounts of healthy oils such as olive oil, butter, and ghee (clarified butter). To stoke your digestive fire, sip ginger tea with your meals and spice your food with warm pungent herbs such as ginger, garlic, cinnamon, clove, basil, oregano, pepper, and chilies.

The goal is to eat in a way that makes you feel good. So when you eat, notice how your food affects you. Do you feel satisfied and energized, or do you feel tired? If you're feeling sluggish, try eating smaller meals so that you don't overwhelm your digestive fire. Don't eat in a way that makes you sigh and say, “I'm exhausted. I need a nap!”

Remember, agni is fire. When you put too much wood or a big, heavy, wet log on fire, it will smolder and maybe even go out. In the same way, too much food—or the wrong kinds of food—can smother your digestive fire. Glutinous grains (like wheat and



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millet), meat, dairy products, and oily food require a strong digestive fire. They can be very nourishing, but if your agni is weak, they create ama instantly. Ama has qualities that are similar to cream cheese—it's heavy, thick, and sticky. It accumulates in the weak areas of your body, which are different for each individual. For example, for one person it might collect in their knee joints (causing stiffness); for someone else it could block the blood vessels around the heart (causing heart disease). In short, wherever ama is, disease and sickness soon follow.

To prevent this, reduce (or completely avoid) wheat and dairy products for two to three weeks, avoid oily or deep-fried food, and eat lighter grains like quinoa and millet instead. Then watch for a week or two to see how you feel. Many of my patients report that they feel lighter, clearer, and more energized. This is because they have unburdened their agni so that it can burn more brightly.

The last tip is to cleanse your bowels. If your bowels don't move regularly, or if you eat a lot of poor-quality food, the resulting ama can stick to the side of your colon. This impedes the absorption of nutrients as well as the removal of wastes. This state can lead to a condition called autointoxication, which means that the toxins stuck in the colon begin to leach back into your system. This can cause some uncomfortable side effects such as headaches, fatigue, and skin eruptions like acne, hives, and rashes.

To ensure that your bowels move on a daily basis, add more fiber and water to your diet. I recommend the herb psyllium—a soluble fiber that acts like a little scouring brush. It helps move the ama that's stuck to the bowel walls. An ayurvedic blend of herbs called triphala is also helpful. People often think of triphala as a laxative, but it's actually a bowel tonic. It tones the bowel walls and helps the colon function at its optimal level. If you have constipation or diarrhea, triphala helps to bring your eliminative system back to normal. Ayurvedic texts refer to triphala as an "ama scraper"; it helps pull toxins out of the intestines and draws them out of the body.

Anyone can take these herbs. I often tell my patients to take them at the same time—triphala at night and psyllium in the morning—for six to eight weeks in the spring and fall for health maintenance.

For your morning dose of psyllium, use a scant teaspoon (even if the directions on the bottle tell you to take more). Mix it with at least two cups of water or juice and drink it immediately (before the mixture thickens). The psyllium husk is a seed that absorbs about 100 times its weight in water. That's why it's important to drink a lot of water with it; otherwise the fiber will dry you out—especially if you're prone to constipation. If the dosage of one teaspoon of psyllium feels comfortable but only partially effective, try doubling it. But if you start to feel bloated or constipated, either reduce your dosage or increase your water intake. (Note: don't take medication or vitamins at the same time that you take your psyllium; they will not be absorbed once surrounded by the fiber).

For your evening dose of herbs, steep one teaspoon of loose triphala in a cup of boiling water and let it sit for at least six to eight hours. To time this properly, prepare your evening dose midday, or even before you leave the house in the morning. Drink the tea at bedtime on an empty stomach, leaving the grinds at the bottom of the cup. The ayurvedic ideal is that you should taste the herbs, because the taste has a subtle medicinal effect on you. But if you don't like the taste of triphala, you can take it in capsule or tablet form instead, following the directions on the package (usually two pills once or twice a day, on an empty stomach, with warm water).

If you have a lot of ama in your system, you may experience detox reactions from the triphala, such as a rash, headache, or several bowel movements. If so, cut your dose in half. But don't worry. Detox reactions are not a bad sign; you are helping your body get rid of accumulated ama. It's good to let that happen in a gentle, gradual way.

To answer your original question: By cleansing your system of ama and boosting your metabolism through exercise, hatha yoga, diet, and herbs, you can strengthen your agni and feel more alert, energized, and full of life.

Breathe Before You Eat!

Our nervous system has two ways of responding to the world: the fight-or-flight (sympathetic) response and the rest-and-digest (parasympathetic) response. When we rush through our day, worry constantly, or cling to negative mental states, our nervous system gets stuck in the fight-or-flight mode. But when we feel safe and relaxed, the parasympathetic response switches on and our heart rate drops, respiration slows and deepens, and blood flows to the core of the body—promoting healthy immunity and efficient digestion.

By ensuring that your nervous system is in rest-and-digest mode before you eat, you can help your body digest the foods you eat (and avoid the negative side effects of poor digestion such as bloating, acid reflux, and indigestion). The easiest way to do this is to breathe diaphragmatically. So, just before you eat, take three to four deep diaphragmatic breaths—then enjoy!

Director of the [Himalayan Institute's Total Health Center](#), Carrie Demers, MD, blends modern medicine with ayurveda, homeopathy, nutrition, herbal medicine, hatha yoga, and massage.

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