

# How to Cleanse, the Ayurvedic Way

## How to Cleanse, the Ayurvedic Way



Cleansing is a ritual practice steeped in tradition. While modern-day cleanses such as juice fasts or elimination diets abound, an Ayurvedic cleanse is anything but modern. Individuals have been following this cleanse for hundreds of years. While many options exist, they can be depleting or imbalancing. Most individuals can not—and should not—exist on solely juice for several days.

The Ayurvedic cleanse is a powerful draw for a variety of reasons. This cleanse, often referred to in its complete format as *panchakarma*, nourishes rather than deprives. It is balancing to all constitutions, or *doshas*, and is low-cost, making it accessible to all. Furthermore, it focuses on healing and replenishing both the body and mind, which Deepak Chopra refers to as one and the same—the *body-mind*.

Interested in taking on your own Ayurvedic cleanse? Read on to construct a program that is right for you.

## When to Cleanse

An Ayurvedic cleanse, or detoxification, can be completed any time you feel excess *ama*, or the toxic byproducts of undigested food, emotions, and experiences. Symptoms of excessive *ama* include:

- Fatigue
- Irritability
- Stiffness or achiness in the body
- Undesired weight gain or inability to lose excess weight
- Cravings, especially for sugar or processed carbohydrates
- Candida
- Skin problems, such as dry skin, rash, or acne
- White coating on tongue, especially upon waking in the morning

Traditionally, Ayurvedic cleanses are performed three times annually. Their timing corresponds with the change in seasons. Ayurveda recognizes three seasons based on their primary doshic qualities:

1. Spring
2. Summer
3. Winter

You can perform a detoxifying cleanse at the beginning of the season, or whenever you are feeling sluggish.

## Ayurvedic Cleansing: Three Phases

The traditional Ayurvedic cleanse, called *panchakarma*, is between a three-and four-week process in which body treatments are customised for the individual by an Ayurvedic practitioner. However, you can perform your own more generic Ayurvedic cleanse at home. The full *panchakarma* cleanse typically lasts three to four weeks, but you can customise to

suit your needs. Each of the three phases is vital to the overall cleanse, so aim to keep each phase the same length of days. For example, your cleanse might be six days (two days spent in each phase), 12 days (four days in each), or 21 days (seven days in each).

## Phase 1: Preparation

The first phase is focused on preparing the gut by eating a clean diet and hydrating. A clean diet is defined here as one that fosters minimal gut residue. During week one, you will want to focus on warm, simple foods and avoid the following:

- Meat, including fish (eggs are okay)
- Dairy
- Processed, packaged, or manufactured foods
- Sugar
- Beans
- Caffeine
- Alcohol

You will also want to make an effort to incorporate plenty of green vegetables, leafy greens, and beets into the diet during this phase, as these are all cleansing for the gut and lymph (see the hydration section below for much more on lymph fluid).

## Sample Week 1 Menu Options

Breakfast:

- Warm oatmeal cooked with chopped apples and cinnamon
- Savory oats: warm oatmeal with ghee, a pinch of salt, and wilted microgreens

Lunch or dinner:

- Vegetable soup and salad topped with shredded beets, small bowl of rice

- Red or green vegetable curry served over rice, with steamed greens
- Quinoa topped with roasted vegetables and tahini sauce
- Stuffed squash: one hollowed-out squash stuffed with seasoned rice and vegetable mixture

## Hydration

Hydration is a key focus during this preparation stage, which will carry over into subsequent stages. By hydrating well, you ensure your gut is lubricated for healthy digestion, and that the lymph fluid is optimally thinned. Lymph fluid is the fluid of immunity in the body. It flows through channels, pumped only by your physical motion or manipulation (think massaging or stretching). The lymph fluid contains white blood cells. These cells surround foreign invaders in the body such as bacteria or mutated cells (such as pre-cancerous cells). The lymph fluid sweeps these cells into “holding chambers” called lymph nodes until they can be eliminated. Factors that can influence lymphatic health include dehydration, which makes the lymph fluid thick and sticky.

Beyond immunity, lymph fluid plays an important role in healthy digestion. The gut is surrounded by a layer of lymph fluid, which helps to destroy any pathogenic invaders that make it through the gut lining during digestion. Again, congested lymph fluid is unable to do this task well, which can result in accumulated *ama*. Make sure your lymph fluid is prepared well for stage 2: eat clean, chomp on some beets and bitter apples, and hydrate, hydrate, hydrate! Ginger tea is a great way to focus on hydration and healthy digestion simultaneously.

## Phase 2: Cleanse (The Kitchari

## Stage)

Now that your gut has gotten a rest from congesting foods and your lymph is thinned, it is time to start fine-tuning your digestive fire, or *agni*. During this phase in many traditional settings, you will focus on a specific type clean eating, a nourishing blend of kitchari meals and ghee oleation. *Oleation* is a term used in Ayurveda to describe a process of ingesting healthy oils.

Why kitchari? Kitchari is a traditional Indian dish prepared with basmati rice, split mung dahl beans, ghee, and spices for flavor. Kitchari is considered a “perfect meal” in that it contains all essential macronutrients: carbohydrate (beans and rice), complete protein (mung dahl), and fat (ghee).

Why ghee? Ghee contains butyric acid, a metabolic byproduct produced in the gut that helps to maintain a healthy intestinal wall. Ghee is packed with omega-3 fatty acids; fat-soluble vitamins; and short-, and medium-, and long-chain fatty acids. Ghee helps to lubricate and soften the inside of the digestive tract, helping with absorption and regularity. Research supports an age-old theory that ingestion of ghee helps to bind and eliminate fat-soluble toxins from the system.

## Daily Menu: Ghee + Kitchari

Here is where the Ayurvedic cleanse really turns some heads. This part, in practice, does not feel as difficult as it sounds. In fact, phase two can feel nourishing and satisfying compared to a typical diet of processed or low-fat foods.

**Morning ghee:** There are two ways to consume your daily ghee—you may drink it each morning and then leave it out of the kitchari for the rest of the day (preferred method), or you may skip the morning ghee sipping and instead add ghee to your kitchari at meals.

- For morning ghee: If choosing to perform the former: you will start each day of phase 2 by drinking ghee on an empty stomach. How much? Typically it is good to start with one tablespoon of melted ghee, and increase by an additional tablespoon for every two days which you stay in phase 2. If you perform phase 2 for seven days, you will drink one tablespoon ghee on an empty stomach on days 1 and 2, two tablespoons on days 3 and 4, three tablespoons on days 5 and 6, and four tablespoons on day 7.
- For “incorporated” ghee: Skip the above step, and instead prepare your three daily kitchari meals using the ghee called for in the recipe.

**Kitchari meals:** Your day’s meals will be composed of kitchari. Try to eat three meals daily, with minimal snacking in between. To accomplish this, it is important to eat until you feel full and completely satisfied during meal time. This is not a time to cut carbs or focus on denying yourself food! By eating until you are fully satiated, you will be able to minimize between meal snacking. A quick internet search will reveal several kitchari recipes, but the ingredients are split mung dahl beans, basmati rice, water, and Indian seasonings. The ghee can be omitted if following the “morning ghee” method or else added to the recipe if following the second method.

## Self-Care

Phase 2 focuses on digestion—this includes digestion of foods as well as experiences. Emotional turmoil, which is stored within you, can accumulate karma just as harmful to your health and well-being as a poor diet. As your body works through its own healing process, it will undoubtedly stir up some stored emotions. This is a good thing! A daily self-care ritual and health and wellness routine during this phase will help you direct love and acceptance toward your past stored traumas, enabling you to release them when you are ready. The

following is a list of possible self-care rituals to perform daily. Choose one or a few:

- **Abhyanga:** Perform self-massage, or let someone else massage you, using warm oil. To balance Vata, use sesame or almond oil. To balance Pitta, use coconut or olive oil. To balance Kapha, use sunflower or safflower oils. The massage can be done in the shower. It is, however, especially nourishing to perform outside of the shower, when the oil can be allowed to stay on and really soak into your skin.
- **Neti Pot:** Use the Neti Pot daily to clear the nasal passageways.
- **Nasya:** Sesame oil is not only for the outside! Hydrate your sinuses by placing sesame oil into a dropper and dropping two to three drops into each nostril with the head tilted back. Allow the head to remain tilted back for a few seconds, sniffing to allow the oil to penetrate.
- **Skin brushing:** Like the gut, skin is surrounded by a layer of lymphatic fluid. Get the fluid moving by dry skin brushing. Using a stiff-bristled brush, brush your skin in the direction of your heart.
- **Exercise:** Cleanses are the perfect time to go easy on your body. Incorporate gentle walks and light yoga into your daily routine while cleansing.
- **Meditation:** Create space for daily meditation. If this is not part of your daily practice already, have no fear. Just find five minutes daily to sit in a comfortable position (the couch is fine), close your eyes, and turn your attention toward your breathing. This counts! This is meditation!
- **Self-reflection:** Self-reflection often works best following meditation, when the subconscious mind reveals its inner workings. Self-reflection can take place mentally, while just sitting still and thinking through things, or also outwardly, such as by journaling or

talking to a trained therapist.

Not sure what to reflect on? Try this simple technique: picture yourself as a child, six or seven years old. What is your greatest fear at that age? Put yourself back into your own childhood shoes, and feel what that fear felt like in your body. After a few moments, turn your attention toward your adult self. When in life do you experience that same feeling of fear? Reflect on these ties. Send love, acceptance, and healing to the sweet child of you, as well as to the now grown, adult version of child you.

## A Note about Healing

Any of the following symptoms of healing can arise during the first and second phases:

- Nausea
- Headache
- Fatigue
- Irritability
- Low mood/tearfulness

These symptoms are hard to deal with, but are signs that you are creating change within. Make sure to continue to hydrate in order to give your body a mode of eliminating the “bad.” Also, monitor your bowel movements. You should be having a bowel movement at least daily, though optimally two to three times daily. If your “output” is sluggish, try to increase your hydration and even consider adding a psyllium husk supplement daily to ensure things are moving. A milk laxative tea such as senna may also be useful, though this should only be used if both hydration and fiber have not helped.

## Medical Considerations

Because kitchari is neither low calorie nor low in any macronutrients, it can safely be consumed by individuals with a variety of medical conditions, including diabetes. However,

if you are on insulin, it is best to work with your doctor, an ayurvedic doctor, or a registered dietitian to devise a plan that is safe for you. You may need to learn to adjust your insulin to match a different amount of carbohydrate you will be eating if it is different than your typical meal plan.

## Phase 3: Rejuvenate

Phase 3 is similar to phase 1—back to clean eating and a continued focus on hydration. During this phase, you may be tempted to eat everything at once, relieved to once again enter the world of food variety. However, it is important to reintroduce foods slowly—maybe starting by adding in steamed vegetables the first few days, followed by egg or beans later in the week. Continue to avoid caffeine, alcohol, meat, and sugar during this time, as your body will likely be sensitive to these items.

## A Tool for Fostering Lifelong Balance

Many people do well following a cleanse individually, while others find strength and comfort cleansing with a friend or partner. No matter your preference, you can perform your own Ayurvedic tune-up traditionally at the change of season, or whenever you feel the need to rebalance both the body and the mind.

*\*Editor's Note: The information in this article is intended for your educational use only; does not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Chopra Center's Mind-Body Medical Group; and is not a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the advice of your physician or other qualified health providers with any questions you may have regarding a medical condition and before undertaking any diet, supplement, fitness, or other*

*health program.*

Who wants to join in with this challenge?

---