

Ama: The Antithesis of Agni



In Ayurveda, the concept of fire, or *agni*, is of central importance. In fact, the strength of agni in the body is among the most critical factors in determining overall health. By contrast, *ama* is a toxic, disease causing substance that forms as a result of impaired agni, and that, in turn, destroys agni. In this way, impaired agni and the creation of ama routinely enter into a vicious and self-perpetuating cycle. Unfortunately, the accumulation of ama is extremely detrimental to our health; it can lead to all kinds of imbalances and is a causative factor in any number of diseases. As a result, understanding ama as the antithesis of agni—learning what it is exactly, how to recognize it, how to rid the body of it, and how to kindle agni in its place—can be a very helpful step in the journey toward optimal health.

What is Ama?

Ama is a Sanskrit word that translates literally to mean things like “unripe,” “uncooked,” “raw,” “immature,” or “undigested.”¹ Essentially, it is a form of un-metabolized waste that cannot be utilized by the body.¹ To some degree, the formation of small amounts of ama is a normal part of the digestive process, provided it is efficiently removed. But when it is not regularly cleared and eliminated, ama becomes hugely problematic. In fact, ama is said to be the root cause of all disease, and *amaya*, a Sanskrit word for disease literally means “that which is born out of ama.”² The connection between ama and the disease process makes perfect sense because the qualities of ama are in direct opposition to those of agni. And remember, strong agni is essential to the maintenance of proper health. In other words, when agni is compromised and when ama accumulates, our health suffers, and the two situations are mutually reinforcing.

The qualities of agni and ama illustrate their perfect opposition to one another.

Agni is:

- Hot
- Sharp
- Light
- Dry
- Subtle
- Clear
- Spreading
- Fragrant

Ama is:

- Cold
- Dull
- Heavy
- Oily, Viscous, and Wet
- Gross
- Sticky, Slimy
- Stable, Stagnant
- Foul Smelling

Is it Really That Bad?

Ama is fairly easy to clear from the digestive tract, but once it spreads into the deeper tissues, it becomes much more difficult to eliminate.² As ama accumulates in the body, it inevitably clogs the channels of the body (*srotamsi*) and disrupts tissue nutrition.² This alone is problematic, but ama can disturb physiological processes at the cellular level as well. When ama finds its way into the deeper tissues, it coats and clogs individual cell membranes—inhibiting cellular communication and weakening the immune response. This eventually leads to a loss of intelligence at the cellular level, which can cause much more serious diseases such as autoimmune disorders, or cancer.^{2,5}

Signs & Symptoms of Ama

Generalized signs and symptoms of ama in the body include:³

- Clogging of the channels (may cause symptoms like sinus congestion, lymph congestion, constipation, fibrocystic changes, etc.)
- Fatigue



- Heaviness
- Abnormal flow of vata (there are many ways this can manifest in the body, but examples include excess upward moving energy causing heartburn or excess downward moving energy causing diarrhea)
- Indigestion
- Stagnation
- Abnormal taste, muted taste, or poor appetite
- Sexual debility
- Mental confusion
- Feeling unclean

Depending on where ama is in the body, it can cause more specific signs and symptoms such as a thick coating on the tongue, all kinds of congestion, loss of strength, dull eyes, skin blemishes, fevers, excess weight, poor circulation, edema and swelling, stiffness or inhibited movement, soreness at the roots of the hair, or generalized aches and pains.^{2,3} In the digestive tract, ama tends to cause changes taste perception, loss of appetite, indigestion, malabsorption, vitamin and mineral deficiencies, bloating, gas, constipation, diarrhea, sticky stools, or itching at the anus.^{4,3} Ama is also often responsible for foul smelling breath, mucus, urine, and stools.¹ Mentally and emotionally, ama leads to a distinct lack of energy and enthusiasm, low self esteem, anxiety, worry, depression, fear of the unknown, a foggy mind, and unclear thinking.¹

Modern diseases that are a direct result of ama accumulation include:¹

- | | |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| • Atherosclerosis | • Candida albicans overgrowths |
| • Elevated blood sugar | • Blood urea |
| • Late-onset diabetes | • Gout |
| • Some types of depression | • Gall stones |
| • Rheumatoid factor | • Kidney stones |
| • Elevated Immunoglobulin E | • Increased liver enzymes |
| • Helicopylori bacteria | • Glaucoma |
| • Leukocytosis | • Fevers |
| • Excess red blood cell count | • Bacterial infections |
| • Excess platelet count | • Tumors |

The Causes of Ama

There are any number of reasons that ama can begin to accumulate in the body, but impaired agni is always a piece of the puzzle. And because ama itself disturbs agni, it can sometimes be difficult to tease out which came first. In reality, it doesn't matter. Habits that disrupt agni can often be implicated in the formation of ama. Likewise, habits that contribute to the formation of ama will disturb agni. Here are some examples of such habits:^{3,2,1}

- A poor diet, which might involve:
 - Overeating or emotional eating
 - Improper **food combinations**
 - Especially heavy food



- Fried food
- Excess amounts of cold or raw foods
- Highly processed or sugary foods
- An excess of the sweet, sour, or salty tastes
- A detrimental lifestyle (e.g. high stress, excess or inadequate sleep, lack of routine, excessive or inadequate exercise, etc.)
- Irregular eating habits
- Sleeping or eating before food is digested
- Sleeping during the day (for some constitutions)
- Lack of exercise
- Repressed or unresolved emotions

In Ayurveda, removing the cause of an imbalance is always one of the first steps in the line of treatment. While the exact cause in your case may not be entirely obvious to you, an Ayurvedic practitioner can help you to identify and redirect any aspects of your life that may be compromising your health. In the mean time, the following suggestions will be helpful.

General Support for Digesting & Eliminating Ama

Fortunately, there are a number of ways to encourage the body to digest ama and eliminate it from the body. The following strategies support the body's natural, physiological detoxification process. Ultimately, they bolster the digestive capacity, improve tissue nutrition, and help to eliminate ama via the urine, feces, and sweat.⁴

Therapeutic Herbs

Herbal support is often indicated when the agni is strong enough to produce an appetite, but not strong enough to completely digest the food, resulting in the formation of ama.⁴ The bitter and astringent tastes are a powerful combination because the bitter taste dries and drains ama, while the pungent taste destroys and digests it.¹ This is a common flavor combination in herbs and formulas widely used to digest ama.

Ayurveda reveres a surprising number of herbs for their ability to digest and eliminate ama. Often, they are the same herbs that are taken before meals to kindle the digestive fire, but they are taken after meals, in significantly larger doses.⁴ In this way, the herbs themselves serve as a source of fuel to fan the impaired digestive fire. Obviously, the appropriate combination of ama-reducing herbs depends on the context of each individual and should be determined by a qualified practitioner. Special care should be taken in cases of high pitta or severe inflammatory conditions (e.g. ulcers) because herbs that digest ama also tend to be quite hot and can further aggravate the situation. It is also worth noting that many of these herbs are common household spices like fresh and dried ginger, cinnamon, nutmeg, mustard seed, garlic, cumin, black pepper, fennel, and coriander. Some specific ama-digesting herbs are included in the [vata](#), [pitta](#), and [kapha](#) sections below.



Sweating

Warming the body and inducing a gentle sweat thins ama, loosens its grip on the tissues, and helps to move it toward the digestive tract, making it easier to eliminate. So whether this is accomplished with a gentle steam bath, a sauna, or appropriate exercise, sweating can be tremendously helpful. However, take care if pitta is high, as too much heat and sweating can inadvertently aggravate pitta and trigger additional imbalances.

Sun Bathing

While we certainly need to be particular about when and for how long our skin is exposed to direct sunlight, appropriate doses of sunlight increase lightness, kindle agni, and are especially good for certain types of eczema, psoriasis, arthritis, depression, and water retention.¹ For some, just 10 minutes of morning or evening sunlight is enough; others can easily tolerate 40 minutes.⁴ Special care should be taken not to receive too much sun, and this is especially important in fair-skinned pitta types, who will tolerate the least amount of sunlight.¹ For these types, moon bathing might actually be more balancing.⁴

Receiving Prana

Prana, the vital breath, is the subtle essence of the life force that animates each of us. It infuses every cell and tissue throughout our bodies. It is carried on and stimulated by the breath. Imbibing prana is very helpful in digesting and eliminating ama.¹ There are a number of effective ways to bathe our tissues in fresh prana. These practices are especially good for asthma, bronchitis, emphysema, anxiety, fear, the nervous system as a whole, and the mind.¹ The simplest method is to spend some time in nature and either take several deep, relaxed breaths into the belly, or go for a relaxed, enjoyable hike.⁴ *Pranayama*—either indoors or out of doors (as long as it is not excessively windy)—is another powerful way to infuse the mind-body organism with prana. Specific pranayama practices are included in the vata, pitta, and kapha sections, below. Beginning practices that are appropriate for most anyone include [full yogic breath](#), [ujjayi](#), and [nadi shodhana](#).

Yoga

Yoga is similarly beneficial because it awakens prana throughout the body, warms the body, usually induces a mild sweat, helps to stretch and wring out tissues that may be storing accumulated ama, and calms the mind. While the most balancing style of yoga may vary from one person to the next, just 10–20 minutes of yoga per day can be remarkably transformative. Specific suggested yoga practices are included in the vata, pitta, and kapha sections below.

Diet

The diet can be a powerful ally in eliminating ama. Here are some simple adjustments that can make a huge difference:¹



| | Favor | Reduce or Avoid |
|-------------------------|---|---|
| Tastes | the pungent, bitter, and astringent tastes | the sweet, sour, and salty tastes |
| Fruit | sour fruits like cranberries | especially sweet fruits |
| Vegetables | lots of vegetables and greens (some raw veggies will be especially supportive for pitta) | mushrooms and especially sweet or heavy vegetables (like root vegetables) |
| Grains | whole grains (like barley, quinoa, millet, rye, and basmati rice) | processed and starchy grains (like bread, pastries, wheat, and oats) |
| Legumes | mung beans | |
| Nuts & Seeds | pumpkin seeds (in small quantities) | nuts |
| Oils & Ghee | small amounts of ghee, mustard oil, or flax seed oil | all other oils |
| Dairy | small amounts of goat's milk, if another milk substitute is not agreeable | dairy |
| Animal Foods | | eggs and meat—especially red meat, shellfish, fish, and pork |
| Sweeteners | small amounts of honey (no more than 2 teaspoons per day) | sugar and all other sweeteners |
| Drinks | spicy teas made from ginger, cinnamon, cardamom, or fennel, and dandelion root coffee | iced or chilled drinks |

Taking a short walk after meals or lying on the left side for several minutes after lunch can also help to effectively kindle agni and digest ama.⁴



Fasting

Fasting can be very helpful in eliminating ama, but can also be very provoking to some constitutions and should be done with care. Vata types will often do best on short fasts that include liquidy soups for a bit of sustenance.¹ Pitta types typically tolerate juice fasts, especially during the spring and summer.¹ Kapha types, on the other hand, usually benefit from a brief water-only fast, though they tend to resist actually doing it.¹ In any case, sipping on hot water or spice teas (i.e. black pepper, cinnamon, and cardamom) can help to clear toxins while settling hunger pangs in the stomach.¹ All three doshas respond well to mono-diet types of fasts where something like kitchari is consumed for the length of the cleanse (see next section).

Cleansing Therapies

A deeper cleansing regimen is often required in order to draw ama out of the deep tissues. A number of different cleansing techniques are outlined in our [Introduction to Ayurvedic Cleansing](#). Some are short and simple. Others are longer, more complex, have a deeper impact, and should only be done under the guidance of a trained practitioner. For example, *panchakarma*, Ayurveda's signature cleanse, is entirely organized around loosening ama, toxins, and excess vata, pitta, kapha, from the deep tissues, moving them to the digestive tract, and from there, eliminating them from the body. While there are many options, it is important to choose a cleansing program that feels completely manageable to you and to enlist adequate support for your process. Otherwise, you may struggle and your efforts will not deliver the results you might have hoped for. In any case, an Ayurvedic practitioner can help guide you and can customize your approach to more specifically address your concerns and imbalances.

Cultivating a Supportive State of Mind

Because the mind and body are one, ama is also affected by our quality of consciousness, and can be treated by increasing *sattva* in our lives while being mindful not to overindulge on *rajas* and *tamas*.¹ Sattva is the principle of light, clarity, equilibrium, and wisdom. Rajas is the principle of passion, action, and movement. Tamas is the principle of darkness, inertia, heaviness, and decay. Each of them has a place in our lives, but ama shares qualities with rajas and tamas, not sattva. Therefore, when trying to clear accumulated ama, it is important to expand sattva and to be mindful of balancing rajas and tamas. Here are some ideas about how to do that:¹

- Rajas is balanced with the practice of compassion and patience.
- Tamas is countered by practicing selflessness and generosity.
- Sattva is encouraged by many of the above strategies, spiritual practice, and by cultivating unconditional love, contentment, and peace within.

In addition, consider the impact of simply cultivating deep respect and appreciation for one's self. Bathing the tissues in self-love, can improve the body's intelligence, even at the cellular level.⁵ On the other hand self-deprecating thought patterns and self-loathing can be detrimental to the healing process.



More Precise Tools for Specific Types of Ama

As we have seen, there are a number of effective ways to treat ama systemically. However, ama routinely mixes with vata, pitta, and kapha, and each of the doshas interacts with ama in a unique way. Specific manifestations of imbalance in the body often provide important clues as to which dosha(s) are involved, and can help us to identify additional measures that will provide more specific support to our particular type of ama.

Vata Ama

When ama mixes with vata, it tends to accumulate in the lower abdominal area and pelvic cavity, and has a particular propensity for disturbing the colon and the joints.^{1,4} Vata ama may also cause a dry or astringent taste in the mouth.⁴ As it disturbs agni, vata ama increases the likelihood of constipation, and can also cause dry skin, congestion, bloating, generalized body aches, and pain.² Eventually, vata ama can lead to more serious disorders like diverticulitis, arthritis, and sciatica.¹

Balancing Vata Ama

Because vata ama tends to accumulate in the lower abdomen and the colon, softening demulcents are often indicated, as are herbs and formulas like [Vata Digest tablets](#), [hingvastak](#), [trikatu](#), and aloe vera gel.¹ Herbs and spices that help to digest vata ama include fresh ginger, black pepper, [pippali](#), [fennel](#), [guggulu](#), [chitrak](#), [cinnamon](#), hing, ajwan, mustard, [castor oil](#), and [rock salt](#).⁴ [Nadi Shodhana](#) is a particularly balancing pranayama for vata type ama, and [Vata Pacifying Yoga](#) will be very supportive as well.

Pitta Ama

When ama affects pitta dosha, it tends to accumulate in the central abdominal region, causing stagnation in the small intestine, liver, and gall bladder.¹ Pitta ama also has a tendency to circulate in the blood.¹ It can cause offensive smells that are fleshy, sour, or acidic in nature and may result in a bitter or sour taste in the mouth.⁴ The urine, stools, and the coating on the tongue tend to be dark yellow or greenish in color.² Pitta ama is heavy, stagnant, thick, and cooler than healthy pitta.² It dampens the strength of the digestive fire, subdues the appetite, and can create heartburn, acid indigestion, nausea, diarrhea, feverishness, rashes and other skin disorders, as well as widespread inflammation.² If left untreated, pitta ama can cause ulcerations to mucus linings, more serious disorders in the liver, as well as infections of the blood.¹

Balancing Pitta Ama

Pitta ama responds well to purgation, bitter herbs, rhubarb, and aloe vera gel.¹ Herbs, spices, and formulas that help to digest pitta ama include [Pitta Digest tablets](#), [avipattikar powder](#), [coriander](#), [neem](#), [musta](#), fresh ginger, [cinnamon](#), lime, and tamarind.^{4,1} [Sheetali](#) is a particularly balancing pranayama, and [Pitta Pacifying Yoga](#) is especially supportive as well.



Kapha Ama

Kapha type ama tends to accumulate in the stomach, chest, lungs, and sinuses.¹ It is thick, sticky, cloudy, stringy, foul smelling, is not easily expectorated, and can create a salty or sweet taste in the mouth.^{2,4} One may feel the urge to burp, but be unable to relieve the sensation.² Kapha ama subdues both agni and the appetite, and often leads to copious mucus, colds, coughs, sinus congestion, as well as lymphatic congestion and tenderness.^{2,1}

Balancing Kapha Ama

Because kapha ama concentrates in the stomach and lungs, it responds well to expectorants, emetics and herbs and spices that are pungent, bitter, and astringent.¹ Herbs, spices, and formulas that help to digest kapha ama include [Kapha Digest tablets](#), [trikatu](#), [dried ginger](#), black pepper, [pippali](#), [cumin](#), [punarnava](#), [chitrak](#), [guggulu](#), garlic, [kutki](#), [vidanga](#), [tulsi](#), mustard, hing, ajwan, and [rock salt](#).^{4,1} [Bhastrika](#) is a particularly balancing pranayama, and [Kapha Pacifying Yoga](#) is very supportive as well.

Broadening Our Perspective

As destructive as ama is, the healing process is remarkably supported by positive ideas and attitudes. So it is also important to direct some attention toward appreciating our bodies and their natural ability (when given proper support) to digest and eliminate ama. Remember, ama cannot form in the presence of truly balanced agni. So in the long run, tending to agni is just as important as eradicating ama. If you are interested in expanding your understanding of agni and the different types of imbalances that can hinder it's proper functioning, you may find these additional resources helpful:

- [The Importance of Healthy Digestion](#)
As an introduction to the critically important Ayurvedic concept of agni, this resource explores agni's role in maintaining health and vitality throughout the body, and offers practical tools for kindling the sacred fire within.
- [The Importance of Agni](#)
This article explores the specific functions of agni, as well as the signs and symptoms of both healthy and impaired agni.
- [The Four Varieties of Agni](#)
This article compares balanced agni to the different types of imbalances that can disrupt it when excess vata, pitta, or kapha accumulate in the body, and offers appropriate therapies for each type of imbalance.
- [An Ayurvedic Guide to Healthy Elimination](#)
Elimination is critical to the successful eradication of ama. This resource provides a comprehensive look at healthy elimination through the lens of Ayurveda; it highlights the importance of healthy bowel habits and stools, offers some general tips for supporting proper elimination, and links to more specific articles on [vata type elimination](#), [pitta type elimination](#), and [kapha type elimination](#).



References

¹ Pole, Sebastian. *Ayurvedic Medicine: The Principles of Traditional Practice*. London: Churchill Livingstone, 2006. Print. 44-46, 103-105.

² Lad, Vasant. *Textbook of Ayurveda, Volume II: A Complete Guide to Clinical Assessment*. Albuquerque: The Ayurvedic Press, 2006. Print. 190, 199-202.

³ Lad, Vasant. *Textbook of Ayurveda Volume I: Fundamental Principles of Ayurveda*. Albuquerque: The Ayurvedic Press, 2002. Print. 89-90.

⁴ Lad, Vasant. *Textbook of Ayurveda Volume III: General Principles of Management and Treatment*. Albuquerque: The Ayurvedic Press, 2012. Print. 136-155.

⁵ Lad, Vasant. *The Complete Book of Ayurvedic Home Remedies*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998. Print. 54-55.

