

# Ayurvedic medicine and Indian literature on epilepsy

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## AYURVEDA

The chief source of ancient Indian Aryan culture and medicine are the four *Vedas* that are traditionally believed to be revealed to the sages by Brahma (the creator) some 6,000 years before Christian era. Most western scholars believe that the oldest of the four *Vedas* was compiled during the second millennium BC. The word *Ayurveda* (in Sanskrit *Ayu* means life, and *Veda* means to know) means the knowledge of life by which the nature of life is understood and thus life is prolonged. Unfortunately *Ayurveda* is not available in its original form, but most of its contents are revealed to us by the *Samhitas* (the encyclopedic works) of Caraka and Sushruta. These texts originally written about 1,000 BC are considered to be the most authentic and renowned representatives of the original *Ayurveda*.<sup>1</sup> *Caraka Samhita* (around 1,000-800 BC), a treatise on the ancient Indian system of medicine was composed by Agnivesa, redacted by Caraka and reconstructed by Drdhabala. The *Sushruta Samhita* has been acknowledged as one of the greatest of its kind in Sanskrit literature and is important from the surgical point of view.<sup>1</sup>

## EPILEPSY IN AYURVEDA

There are abundant references to all aspects of epilepsy including symptomatology, etiology, diagnosis, and treatment in the *Ayurvedic* literature. The eighth chapter of *Nidanasthana* (diagnosis) and tenth chapter of *Chikitsasthana* (treatment) of the *Carakasamhita* are devoted exclusively to epilepsy.<sup>1</sup> Convulsions (*akshepaka*), apoplectic fits (*apatantraka*), and hysterical fits (*daruna apatantraka*) are few of the important nervous system disorders mentioned.

### Definition

In most Ayurvedic texts, epilepsy has been mentioned as *Apasmara* or *Apasmrti*, and has been described as one of the earliest eight diseases known (diagnosed) that can be controlled only with medical therapies and can sometimes be

incurable and remain uncontrolled.<sup>2</sup>

### Clinical description, classification and etiology

It is classified as prodromal symptoms and signs (*purvarupa*) and clinical manifestations (*rupa*). The prodrome (*purvarupa*) includes: contraction of eyebrows, constant irregular movement of eyes, hearing of such sounds as are non-existent, excessive discharge of saliva and nasal excreta, disinclination for food (anorexia and indigestion), distension of abdomen, body aches, transient blackout, giddiness, profuse sweating, increased thirst, fainting, hallucinations, falling and insomnia.<sup>2</sup>

In Ayurveda, clinical manifestations of epilepsy (*rupa*) are divided into four types according to the dominant *dosa* (humour) involved in its pathogenesis: *Vataja*, *Pittaja*, *Kaphaja* and *Sannipataja*. The *Vataja* type is characterized by frequent fits, regaining consciousness in shortest time interval; bulging eyes; excessive crying, frothing at mouth; irregularly contracted fingers; reddish rough and blackish nails, eyes, face and skin; hallucinations and trembling. *Kaphaja* type has features of prolonged fits with delayed recovery; increased frothing at mouth; white nails, eyes, face and skin; and visions of white, heavy, unctuous, smooth objects (description like grand mal seizures). *Pittaja* type is characterized by regaining consciousness in shorter periods, scratching of ground, greenish-yellow and coppery nails, eyes, face and skin; and visions of bloody, agitated, irritated, frightful and burning objects (description like partial complex seizures). The fourth type, the *Sannipatika* form of the disease, is caused by the simultaneous vitiation of all the three *dosas* that gives rise to a combination of symptoms and signs and is incurable (description like intractable epilepsy).<sup>2</sup>

In Ayurvedic texts, three basic factors have been implicated for the etiology of epilepsy. Endogenous factors (genetic, congenital, constitutional, enzymatic disturbances and idiopathic); Exogenous factors (intake of unwholesome and unhygienic foods, aggravation of *vata dosa* due to trauma, worms and other

environmental factors); and Psychological factors (excessive worry, grief, fear, passion, anger, anxiety and excitement). The aggravated *dosa* spreads throughout the body through the nerves (*dhamanis*) leading to the manifestation of the epileptic fit in the form of shaking jerks or convulsions (*akshepaka*) or episodes of brief unconsciousness without shaking (*apatantraka*).<sup>2</sup>

#### *Clinical examination and diagnosis*

A comprehensive evaluation of the patient (*rogi pariksha*) precedes the disease diagnosis (*roga pariksha*). Ayurveda emphasizes on a detailed history of the patient for a correct diagnosis.

### TREATMENT OF EPILEPSY

Various treatment modalities that include strong elimination and alleviation therapies, depending upon specific requirements are mentioned as being useful for epilepsy patients. When epilepsy is associated with extrinsic factors, then *mantras* (hymns) have been recommended. The physician is advised to first take steps for the awakening of heart channels and mind blocked by *dosas* (humors) by drastic emesis (*Vatika Apasmara*), enema (*Paittika Apasmara*) and purgatives (*Slaismika Apasmara*). Drug formulations have been recommended only after the patient has been cleansed by all means and consoled well.<sup>1</sup>

A wide variety of *ghrtas* (purified butters) have been recommended for internal use. One of the most important among these is *Maha Panca Gavya Ghrta*. Use of mixtures of *ghrta* and *taila* (oil) cooked with drugs has also been mentioned. Oils cooked with different herbal and animal products have been recommended for anointing the body of the patient. Even *nasyas* (nasal applications) have been recommended. The use of a wide variety of *anjanas* (collyriums) and *anjana vartikas* (collyriu sticks) to bring the patient to senses has also been mentioned. A variety of Ayurvedic medicines for epilepsy available in the Indian market include: *Asvagandhadyarishta*, *Bali Tail*, *Brahmi ghruta*, *chandanadi tail*, *Chaturmukha rasa*, *haratala bhasma*, *Kalyanaka ghruta*, *Kumaryasava*, *Mahakalayanaka ghruta*, *Mahamrutyunjaya rasa*, *Rajata bhasma*, *saarasvatarishta*, *sarpagandha vati*, *Svarna bhasma*, *Svarnamakshika bhasma*, *Vaatakulantaka rasa*, and *Yogendra rasa*.<sup>2</sup>

The modes of administration of drugs for epilepsy recommended in Ayurveda include external applications, internal use, application in

the eyes and nose. The only first-aid measure recommended in epilepsy is blood-letting (*Siravedha*) from the veins of the temples. Cauterization of both the parietal bones with needles (*Soocivedha*) has also been mentioned.<sup>1</sup>

### THE FUTURE

Practitioners of modern medicine and ancient medicine like Ayurveda should join hands with researchers to understand the scientific basis of Ayurvedic therapies using the current scientific principles and technologies. Modern and Ancient medicine systems should be combined to plan effective health-care delivery systems for better epilepsy care. Ayurvedic therapies could be scientifically tested and then used at least as add-on therapies like the new anti-epileptic drugs (AEDs). Ayurvedic and other ancient therapies could form the basis of the future “New AEDs”.

### REFERENCES

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