

Rasayana on Your Plate : Functional Foods and Their Ayurvedic Significance in Health Maintenance

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Abstract: . In Ayurveda, Ahara is recognized as one of the Traya Upastambha essential for maintaining health. Beyond mere sustenance, food is revered as a potent instrument for healing and longevity—especially when aligned with an individual's Prakriti, Agni and Ritucharya. Ayurveda, the ancient Indian system of holistic health, places great emphasis on Rasayana—a therapeutic approach designed to enhance longevity, cognitive function, immunity, and overall vitality. In parallel, the modern concept of functional foods refers to dietary components that offer health benefits beyond basic nutrition. It also presents a thoughtfully curated list of Rasayana dravyas that can be seamlessly integrated into daily diets, making the idea of “Rasayana on your plate” both accessible and impactful. This novel exploration highlights how integrating Rasayana principles into daily diets can help maintain vitality, immunity, cognitive function, and resilience against disease. The Rasayana branch of Ayurveda focuses on dietary and behavioral practices that preserve and enhance ojas—the vital essence responsible for immunity, vigor, and overall vitality.

In contemporary health discourse, there is a growing interest in functional foods—those that deliver benefits extending beyond basic nutrition, including disease prevention and health promotion. This emerging field reflects the Ayurvedic concept of Ajasrika Rasayana, which emphasizes the regular consumption of health-enhancing dietary substances^[1]. Despite this conceptual alignment, the practical application of Rasayana principles in daily dietary planning remains relatively unexplored. This article proposes a novel synthesis of classical Ayurvedic wisdom and modern nutritional science, offering an innovative framework for preventive healthcare through diet and it reinterprets traditional Rasayana through a modern nutritional framework, proposing that everyday foods—when selected and consumed in harmony with Ayurvedic principles—act as functional Rasayanas.

Keywords: Ajasrika Rasayana, Ahara, Rasayana

INTRODUCTION:

Rasayana is one of the principal branches of Ashtanga Ayurveda, primarily focused on the preservation and promotion of health. While the fundamental objectives of Ayurveda include both the prevention and treatment of disease, equal emphasis is placed on enhancing overall well-being. Rasayana therapy plays a key role in achieving these goals by strengthening the immune system, supporting tissue regeneration, and performing a range of vital physiological functions essential for maintaining balance and vitality. The term rasayana is derived from two words- “Rasa” and “Ayana” with the literal meaning of nutrition and path respectively. Rasayana is a promotive therapy aimed at preserving the health of body tissues and promoting longevity. According to Acharya Sushruta, Rasayana should ideally be administered during early or middle age to maximize its rejuvenative and preventive benefits. Rasayana therapy, a specialized branch of Ayurveda, is centered on improving the quality of life through comprehensive dietary and lifestyle practices that promote tissue regeneration, enhance disease resistance, and decelerate the aging process^[2]. Within this framework, **Ajasrika Rasayana** refers to the regular consumption of naturally nourishing and health-enhancing foods. This concept closely parallels modern-day functional foods—dietary components that offer specific physiological benefits beyond basic nutrition.

This article examines the convergence of traditional Rasayana principles with contemporary functional food science, and proposes an integrative approach for optimizing health through conscious, Rasayana-informed dietary choices in daily life.

Understanding Rasayana: The Ayurvedic Rejuvenator

Rasayana therapy is a cornerstone of Ayurvedic preventive and promotive health, aimed at enhancing both physiological and cognitive resilience.

The key objectives of Rasayana therapy include:

- Enhancing *Ojas* – the subtle essence responsible for immunity, vitality, and overall health
- Promoting *Medha* , *Smriti* and *Bala*
- Supporting tissue regeneration and slowing cellular aging processes

Types of Rasayana Therapy

1. **Ajasrika Rasayana** – Involves the regular intake of wholesome foods and adherence to a balanced lifestyle to promote general well-being. Common examples include *ghrita* , *ksheera* , and *madhu* .
2. **Kamy Rasayana** – Targeted for the enhancement of specific qualities such as *Balya*, *Varnya*, *Medhya*.
Ex: *Amalaki*, *Brahmi*, *Vacha*
3. **Naimittika Rasayana** – Therapeutic Rasayana used as an adjunct in managing specific health conditions . Ex: *Tuvaraka Rasayana* in Kusta, *Shilajatu Rasayana* in Prameha

Acharya Sushruta emphasizes that Rasayana therapy is most effective when initiated during early or middle age, as this timing helps preserve tissue integrity, immune function, and overall vitality [3].

Functional Foods: A Contemporary Parallel[3]

Functional foods are defined as dietary components that offer physiological benefits beyond basic nutrition, contributing to health promotion and the prevention of chronic diseases. These foods are increasingly recognized for their role in maintaining homeostasis and enhancing resilience against environmental and lifestyle-related stressors. Functional foods are products that provide benefits beyond basic nutrition. These include foods enriched with bioactive substances that help improve health, immunity, or physiological functions. FSSAI regulates them under the 2016 regulations^[3]

Difference between normal and functional food

Normal Food = Nutrition

Functional Food = Nutrition + Specific Health Benefit

Aspect	Normal Food	Functional Food
Definition	Food consumed for basic nutrition and sustenance	Food that provides additional health benefits beyond basic nutrition
Purpose	To meet daily energy and nutrient requirements	To promote health, prevent disease, or improve physiological functions
Composition	Natural and minimally processed nutrients	Enriched or fortified with bioactive compounds like omega-3, probiotics, herbs
Regulatory Status	Regulated as general food under FSSAI	Regulated under FSSAI's 2016 Nutraceutical & Functional Food regulations
Health Claims	No health specific claims allowed	Permitted to make structure-function claims (e.g., “ <i>supports immunity</i> ”)
Examples	Rice,dal, vegetables, chapatti, milk	Probiotic yogurt, amla juice, fortified cereals, <i>ashwagandha bars</i> , <i>omega-3 eggs</i>
Labelling Requirements	Basic nutritional labelling	Specific labeling including health benefit, dosage, and advisory “Not for medicinal use”

Intended Use	For all healthy individuals in general	May target specific populations (e.g., children, elderly, diabetics, athletes)
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Need of functional food:

Functional foods go beyond basic nutrition—they are consumed not only to satisfy hunger but also to provide additional health benefits, potentially reducing the risk of chronic diseases and supporting optimal physiological functions.

Major Food categories and their functional components

Sl No.	Category	Functional Components
1	Cereals	Minerals, Vitamin E, γ -oryzanol
2	Legumes and Pulses	Isoflavones, Dietary fibre
3	Oils	Omega-3 fatty acids (flaxseed oil), γ -oryzanol (rice bran oil), Oleuropein (olive oil)
4	Fruits and Vegetables	Dietary fibre, Carotenoids (carrot), Dithiolthiones (cruciferous vegetables), Beta-carotene and Lutein (green leafy vegetables), Lycopene (tomato), Resveratrol (grapes), Sulphur compounds (alliums), Polyphenols
5	Fishes	Omega-3 fatty acids (tuna, salmon, mackerel)
6	Diary Products	Probiotics
7	Spices and Herbs	Curcuminoids (turmeric), Piperine (pepper), Eugenol (clove, basil, cinnamon), Gingerol and Shogaol (ginger), Diosgenin, 4-hydroxyisoleucine, Galactomannan (fenugreek), Flavonoids, Diallyl sulphate, Alliin, Ajoene, Allicin (garlic), Cinnamtannin B1 (cinnamon)

Ayurveda Ahara Concept as per FSSAI

In order to recognize India's age old principles of Ayurveda and the Aahara prepared as per ancient texts, Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) has formulated Food Safety and Standards (Ayurveda Aahara) Regulations, 2022 in consultation with the Ministry of Ayush and notified the regulations in the official gazette on 5th May, 2022.

The regulations define "Ayurveda Aahara" - as a food prepared in accordance with the recipes or ingredients or processes as per method described in the authoritative books of Ayurveda listed under 'Schedule A' of these regulations. The Regulations, inter-alia, exclude: Ayurvedic drugs or proprietary Ayurvedic medicines and medicinal products, cosmetics, narcotic or psychotropic substances

Prominent examples include:

- **Omega-3 fatty acids** (e.g., flaxseeds, fish oil) – known for their cardioprotective effects and anti-inflammatory properties
- **Probiotics and fermented foods** (e.g., curd, buttermilk) – support digestive health and promote a balanced gut microbiome
- **Antioxidant-rich foods** (e.g., berries, turmeric) – help combat oxidative stress and protect cellular integrity
- **Adaptogens** (e.g., Ashwagandha) – enhance the body's capacity to cope with physical and mental stress

These functional foods contribute to improved immunity, reduced inflammation, enhanced cognitive function, and metabolic regulation—health benefits that have long been emphasized in Ayurvedic Rasayana therapy.

Rasayana on Your Plate: A Novel Integrative Framework

This article proposes the concept of "Rasayana on your plate" as an actionable framework for health maintenance. By identifying everyday Rasayana dravyas with functional food value, it becomes feasible to design meals that are both traditionally therapeutic and scientifically validated.

Rasayana Foods and Their Functional Benefits^[4]

Ayurvedic Name	Modern Equivalent	Functional Role	Classical Actions
Ghritha	Ghee	Cognitive enhancer, Gut healer	Medhya, Vatahara, Ojovardaka
Ksheera	Milk	Rejuvenative, Laxative	Jeevaniya, Ojovardaka, Dhatuwardaka

In addition to this , we can include **Nithya Sevaniya Ahara Dravyas** for Rasayana effect. The Nithya Sevaniya ahara Dravya include Shastikashali, Mudga, Saindhava, Amalaki, Yava, Antariksha Paya, Sarpi and Jangala Mamsa^[5] Contemporary studies have validated several Rasayana dravyas for their pharmacological effects:

- **Amalaki** (*Embllica officinalis*) has been extensively studied for its potent antioxidant, anti-inflammatory, and immunomodulatory properties. It plays a vital role in enhancing cellular defense mechanisms and promoting immune resilience.
- **Curcumin**, the principal bioactive compound in *Haridra* (*Curcuma longa*), has been shown to regulate inflammatory pathways. It is currently under clinical investigation for its therapeutic potential in managing neurodegenerative and autoimmune conditions.
- **Ashwagandha** (*Withania somnifera*) has demonstrated significant stress-relieving, anxiolytic, and muscle-strengthening effects in randomized controlled trials, highlighting its adaptogenic and rejuvenative potential.
- **Ghritha** (clarified butter), when consumed in moderation, has been found to improve the absorption of fat-soluble nutrients, support cognitive health, and nourish the intestinal mucosa, thereby promoting overall digestive and neurological well-being^[7]

Necessity of Shodhana Before Rasayana:

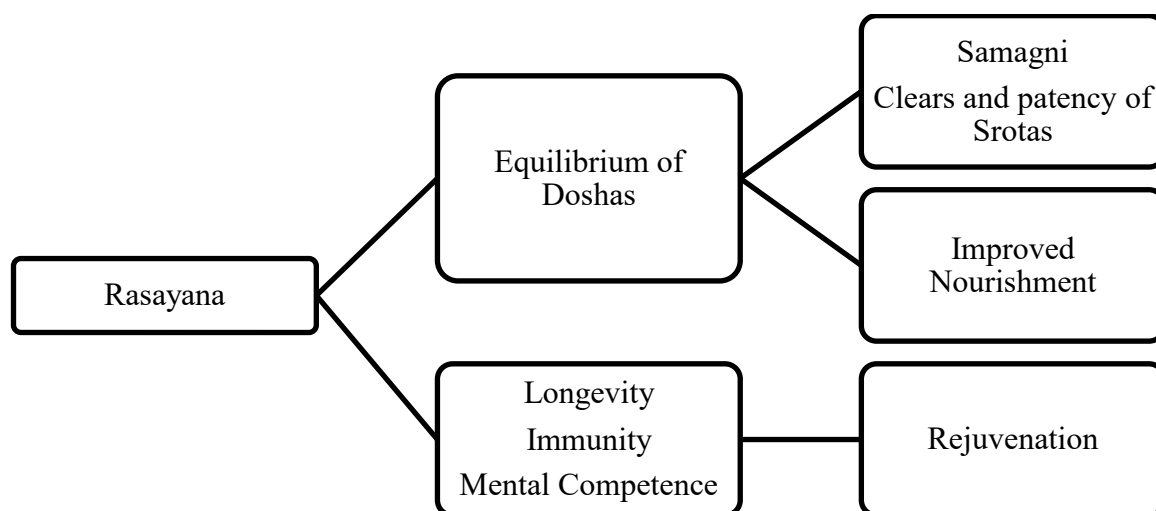
There is a necessity of **Shodhana** before the administration of **Rasayana** - **except in Ajasrika Rasayana** .According to Ayurveda, Rasayana acts best in a body that is *free of toxins* (Ama) and *well-prepared* to absorb and assimilate the rejuvenating substances.

Charaka Samhita (Chikitsa Sthana 1/1/29–30) states:

“*Shuddhe hi sharire rasayanam bhajyate yatha loham taptam abhyaktam...*”–

Rasayana therapy works best in a purified body, just as medicated oil permeates well-heated metal. Shodhana increases the **bioavailability** and **potency** of Rasayana dravyas and enhances **Dhatu agni**, allowing proper conversion and assimilation at tissue levels

Mode of Action Of Rasayana:



Antioxidant: Rasayana reduces oxidative damage caused by free radicals like Vit C, Vit E, Beta carotene.
Eg. Guduchi, Ashwaganda, Amalaki

Adaptogenic: Rasayana increases endurance and sustaining capacity in individuals by promoting dehabala.

Immunomodulatory: Rasayana strengthens the immunity by promoting bodily defence mechanisms like WBC count, improving immune function.

Anti-aging: Through the anti oxidant effect it reduces oxidative stress and there by leading to telomerase enzyme activation which promotes anti aging effect.

Eg: *Chyavanaprash*, *Amalaki*

Anabolic: Rasayana maintains Equilibrium of *Dhatus* and there by enhances nutrient absorption and tissue synthesis leading to *Balavardana*.

Eg: *Gokshura*, *Shatavari*, *Ashwaganda*.

Neuroprotective: Rasayana nourishes the *Dhatus* and improves *Medha*, *Smriti* and *Buddi* there by activating the neurogenesis and cognitive functions .

CONCLUSION: The concept of *Ajasrika Rasayana* holds immense relevance in both classical Ayurvedic doctrine and contemporary preventive healthcare. As elaborated in *Aṣṭāṅga Hṛdaya Sūtrasthāna*, *Annarakshavidhi* and *Dravadravyavijnaniya*, and reinforced in *Charaka Saṁhitā Cikitsāsthāna* Chapter 1, *Ajasrika Rasayana* comprises daily consumable, nourishing substances such as *dugdha* , *ghṛta* , which promote *bala* , *medhā* , *varṇa* , *āyu*, and *vyādhikṣamatva* .

Unlike *Naimittika* or *Kāmya Rasayana* therapies that require specific indications or preparatory *Śodhana*, *Ajasrika Rasayana* is universally applicable, safe for daily use, and aligned with *Ahāra* and *Vihāra* as *Svasthanya Svasthya Rakṣaṇam* .The daily incorporation of these Rasayana dravyas is not only prescribed in Ayurvedic dinacaryā but is also reflective of the Ayurvedic approach of preserving vitality through *sattvabala-prakopa nivṛtti*.

I chose this topic to emphasize the timeless significance of Rasayana through food, especially in a world increasingly distanced from traditional dietary wisdom. At a time when immunity, mental clarity, and stress resilience are of global concern, the daily, conscious use of *Ajasrika Rasayana* offers a sustainable, evidence-rooted, and culturally resonant strategy for lifelong health. It is not merely a dietary supplement but a philosophy of nourishment, deeply integrated into the Ayurvedic vision of holistic living.

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