



## Systematic Classification of Food in Ayurveda (Aahar Varga) and Its Relevance to Modern Nutritional Frameworks

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### Abstract

Aahara (diet) is regarded in Ayurveda as one of the three fundamental pillars of life (Trayopastambha), along with Nidra (sleep) and Brahmacharya (regulated conduct), and is considered essential for the maintenance of physical strength, vitality, longevity, and mental clarity. Classical Ayurvedic texts, particularly the Brihatrayi—Charaka Samhita, Sushruta Samhita, Ashtanga Hridaya, and AshtangaSangraha—describe a systematic and detailed classification of dietary substances under the concept of Aahar Varga. Charaka classified food into twelve distinct categories including cereals, pulses, meat, vegetables, fruits, milk and milk products, sugarcane derivatives, processed foods, and dietary adjuncts, while Sushruta and Vagbhata further elaborated classifications into Drava (liquid) and Anna (solid) groups with multiple subcategories. These classifications are not merely based on origin or nutrient content but also consider Rasa (taste), Guna (qualities), Veerya (potency), Vipaka (post-digestive effect), and their impact on Doshas and Agni, reflecting a holistic and functional approach to dietetics. In contemporary nutritional science, food groups are categorized primarily according to nutrient composition and physiological function, as seen in the Basic 3, 4, 5, 7, and 11 food group models proposed by organizations such as ICMR and USDA. Although the methodological frameworks differ, both classical Ayurvedic and modern systems aim to ensure balanced nourishment, prevention of deficiency disorders, and promotion of optimal growth and health. The comparative analysis reveals that the Ayurvedic concept of Aahar Varga represents a comprehensive and advanced dietary model that integrates therapeutic, metabolic, and preventive dimensions. Harmonizing classical Ayurvedic dietary principles with modern nutritional science may provide a robust and sustainable framework for promoting holistic health and wellbeing.

**Keywords:** Aahar Varga, Ayurveda, Brihatrayi, Charaka Samhita, Sushruta Samhita, Ashtanga Hridaya, AshtangaSangraha, Dietetics etc.

### Introduction

In the classical Ayurvedic canon, health is not perceived merely as the absence of disease but as a dynamic equilibrium of Dosha, Dhatu, Mala, and Agni, sustained through disciplined living. Among the fundamental sustaining factors of life, Aahara (diet), Nidra (sleep), and Brahmacharya (regulated conduct) are regarded as the three essential pillars (Trayopastambha) of health. Acharya Vagbhata emphatically states that when these three are properly practiced according to scriptural guidelines, the human body is supported just as a building is upheld by its pillars <sup>[1]</sup>. This metaphor highlights the indispensable role of diet in sustaining vitality, immunity, and longevity.

Acharya Charaka further elaborates that these three upastambhas maintain strength, complexion, nourishment, and lifespan when properly observed <sup>[2]</sup>. However, indulgence in unwholesome diet and faulty lifestyle practices deprives the body of these benefits, leading to pathological disturbances.

In another profound exposition, Charaka describes Anna (food) as the very life of living beings <sup>[3]</sup>. According to him, complexion (Varna), clarity of mind (Prasada), voice quality (Swara), longevity (Ayushya), intellect (Medha), happiness

(Sukha), strength (Bala), nourishment (Pushti), and even spiritual pursuits are dependent upon food. All worldly and spiritual achievements are rooted in proper nourishment<sup>3</sup>. Thus, food is not merely material sustenance; it is the foundation of physical, psychological, and spiritual wellbeing. Acharya Sushruta echoes similar sentiments, describing wholesome Ahara as that which instantly nourishes, strengthens, sustains bodily tissues, and enhances enthusiasm, memory, vitality, and digestive fire (Agni) <sup>[4, 5]</sup>.

Modern nutritional science also defines food as any substance—solid or liquid—that, upon ingestion and digestion, supplies essential nutrients required for growth, repair, energy production, and regulation of physiological processes <sup>[6]</sup>. The importance of nutrition during childhood is particularly emphasized, as inadequate nourishment leads to impaired growth, reduced productivity, and diminished cognitive capacity <sup>[7]</sup>.

Because food substances are derived from diverse origins and possess varied nutrient profiles, systematic classification becomes necessary. Ancient Ayurvedic scholars developed comprehensive food group classifications to ensure balanced dietary planning, while modern sciences have adopted

nutrient-based and functional classifications [8, 9]. This detailed review explores the conceptual framework of Aahar Varga in Ayurveda and compares it with contemporary nutritional classifications.

### Classification of Food Groups in Ayurveda (Brihatrayi Perspective)

The classical Ayurvedic texts—Charaka Samhita, Sushruta Samhita, Ashtanga Hridaya, and AshtangaSangraha—provide systematic categorization of dietary substances [10, 13].

#### 1. Charaka's Classification (12 Varga System)

Acharya Charaka, in Sutrasthana Chapter 27, classifies food into 12 distinct Aahar Vargas [10]:

- i). **Shukadhanya Varga** – Cereals
- ii). **Shami dhanya Varga** – Pulses and legumes
- iii). **Mamsa Varga** – Flesh and meat
- iv). **Shaka Varga** – Vegetables
- v). **Phala Varga** – Fruits
- vi). **Harita Varga** – Green leafy vegetables
- vii). **Madhya Varga** – Alcoholic preparations
- viii). **Jala Varga** – Water
- ix). **Gorasa Varga** – Milk and milk products
- x). **Ikshu Varga** – Sugarcane and derivatives
- xi). **Kritanna Varga** – Prepared foods
- xii). **Aaharayogi Varga** – Dietary adjuncts and supportive substances

This classification is remarkable because it incorporates not only raw materials but also processed foods and dietary adjuvants.

#### 2. Sushruta's Classification

Acharya Sushruta divides food groups into two broad categories [11]:

##### (A) Drava DravyaVidhi (Liquid Substances)

Includes:

- Various types of water
- Milk (Ksheera)
- Curd (Dadhi)
- Ghee (Ghrita)
- Oils (Taila)
- Honey (Madhu)
- Sugarcane juice (Ikshu rasa)
- Alcohol (Madhya)
- Urine (Mutra)

##### (B) AnnapanVidhi (Solid and Semi-solid Foods)

Includes:

- Grains
- Pulses
- Meat
- Fruits
- Vegetables
- Flowers
- Roots and tubers
- Salts
- Processed foods
- Bhakshya (hard eatables)
- Anupana (post-meal drinks)

#### 3. Vagbhata's Classification

Vagbhata describes similar classifications in Ashtanga

Hridaya and Ashtanga Sangraha [12, 13]. His categorization includes:

- Shukadhanya Varga
- Shimbidhanya Varga
- Mamsa Varga
- Shaka Varga
- Phala Varga
- Madhya Varga
- Toya Varga
- Ksheera Varga
- Madhu Varga
- Taila Varga
- Lavana Varga
- Kratanna Varga
- Aushadhi Varga

This shows that Ayurveda classified food not merely on nutritional value but on origin, properties (Guna), potency (Veerya), post-digestive effect (Vipaka), and therapeutic utility.

#### Contemporary Classification of Food Groups

Modern nutrition classifies food based on nutrient content and physiological role.

##### Basic "3" Food Groups

- i). Body-building foods (Proteins)
- ii). Energy-giving foods (Carbohydrates & fats)
- iii). Protective foods (Vitamins & minerals)

##### ICMR Five Food Groups [14]

- i). Cereals and millets
- ii). Pulses and legumes
- iii). Milk and meat products
- iv). Fruits and vegetables
- v). Fats and sugars

Recently modified into Basic Four Groups, combining cereals and pulses.

##### USDA Food Group Plans

USDA developed multiple plans:

- 7 Food Group Plan (1943)
- 4 Food Group Plan (1956)
- 11 Food Group Plan (1964)

These classifications categorized foods based on nutrient composition such as vitamins, proteins, fats, carbohydrates, and minerals.

#### Detailed Nutritional and Ayurvedic Interpretation of Food Groups

**Cereals (Shukadhanya):** Cereals are the staple foods and primary energy source [15]. Ayurveda describes different types of rice and grains based on qualities like heaviness, digestibility, and Dosha effects [10].

Modern view: Rich in carbohydrates, B vitamins, iron, and fiber [14].

**Pulses and Legumes (Shamidhanya/Shimbidhanya):** Excellent protein sources [15]. Ayurveda emphasizes proper processing (soaking, cooking with spices) to improve digestibility [10].

Sprouted pulses enhance Vitamin C content [15].

**Milk and Milk Products (Gorasa/Ksheera):** Milk is

described as a complete food that nourishes all Dhatus [4]. It enhances Ojas and immunity.

Modern science: High-quality protein, calcium, Vitamin B12 [14].

**Meat (Mamsa Varga):** Considered strengthening (Balya) and tissue-building [11]. Prescribed in emaciation and chronic illness.

Modern science: Rich in protein, iron, B-complex vitamins [14].

**Fruits (Phala Varga):** Ayurveda categorizes fruits based on taste and effect on Doshas [10]. Citrus fruits provide Vitamin C [15].

**Vegetables (Shaka Varga):** Green leafy vegetables enhance digestion and supply minerals [11].

Modern science: Rich in carotene, folic acid, calcium, fiber [14].

**Fats and Sugars:** Energy-dense foods [15]. Ayurveda distinguishes between different fats like ghee and oils based on Dosha impact [11].

**Roots and Tubers:** Provide carbohydrates and certain vitamins [15]. Carrots rich in carotene.

**Spices and Condiments:** Improve palatability and stimulate Agni [15].

**Table 1:** Comparative Insights: Ayurveda vs Modern Nutrition

Aspect	Ayurveda	Modern Science
Basis of classification	Guna, Rasa, Veerya, Vipaka	Nutrient composition
Functional emphasis	Dosha balance	Energy & nutrients
Inclusion of processed foods	Yes	Yes
Psychological effects	Emphasized	Limited

Ayurveda integrates digestion (Agni), metabolic transformation, and mental effects, whereas modern nutrition emphasizes biochemical nutrients.

## Discussion

Food is described as Mahabhaishajya (supreme medicine). Balanced inclusion of all food groups ensures tissue nourishment, strength, and disease prevention.

Ancient Acharyas demonstrated remarkable foresight by emphasizing dietary diversity, classification, and personalization. Modern science corroborates that balanced diets prevent deficiency disorders and chronic diseases [7, 9].

## Conclusion

The Ayurvedic concept of Aahar Varga presents a highly systematic and comprehensive dietary classification that remains relevant today. Ancient scholars meticulously categorized foods based on properties, physiological effects, and therapeutic values [10, 13].

Modern nutritional classifications, though framed differently, share the common objective of ensuring balanced nutrient intake [14, 15].

Thus, integration of Ayurvedic wisdom with contemporary nutrition science can offer a holistic dietary framework for physical, mental, and social wellbeing.

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