

Managing Vata

The Key to Flexibility, Support & Healthy Bones

by Sasha Kriese

Vata has the unique ability to move throughout the body. Every aspect of locomotion on physical, mental and emotional levels is under its control. This accounts for *vata's* powerful position among the *doshas*, because *pitta* and *kapha* are devoid of such mobility. However, both get significantly affected by the movements of *vata*, particularly if the latter is out of balance: increased or vitiated *vata* has a tendency to disturb the other two *doshas* functionally and to even 'push' them out of their normal zones. Because of this potential to move and imbalance other *doshas*, *vata* is also considered the 'leader of the *dosha* pack'.

Vata & Asthi Dhatu

Another unique feature of *vata* is its unusual *dosha-dhatu* relationship. While *kapha* and *pitta* follow the common rule that an increase of *dosha* automatically leads to an increase of the associated *dhatu*, *vata* represents an exception here: *asthi* (bone tissue), the only *dhatu* associated with *vata*, actually decreases when *vata* rises. This anomaly, although not fully explained by classical Ayurvedic texts, is probably due to *vata's* catabolic nature. *Pitta's* metabolic and *kapha's* anabolic qualities are effectively creative, whereas *vata's* catabolic tendencies are destructive and thus have a decreasing effect on bone tissue mass.

However, bone degeneration only occurs when *vata* has been abnormally increased or aggravated for some time. According to Ayurvedic pathology, such *vata* aggravation is initially caused by either *sangha* (tissue blockage) or *kshaya* (tissue deficiency). The latter is noteworthy here, because it is not only a cause for, but also an effect of abnormal *vata* increase. Hence, *vata* aggravation that affects *asthi dhatu* leads, if not treated, to a vicious cycle of ever-increasing *vata* and associated progressive bone tissue degeneration.

This destructive process can be felt in the pulse as a distinctive gait of *vata*. Ayurvedic pulse readers of the Siddhaved lineage identify this pulse picture as VAT, which simply denotes that *vata* is degenerating *asthi dhatu*. The VAT pulse can be observed in all arthrotic and arthritic conditions, such as osteoarthritis, osteoporosis, spondylosis, rheumatoid arthritis, gout etc. Each condition can be clearly differentiated according to additional pulse specifics, but the basic VAT pulse is common to all these variations of bone degeneration.

Interestingly, a significant majority of today's patients over the age of 35 (especially women) present with VAT pulse. Some of them already experience associated symptoms like stiffness or pain, but many are still unaware of the condition. However, their pulses clearly show that the process of *vata* adversely affecting bone has started. Some of the main reasons for the currently rising global prevalence of bone degeneration conditions are listed in the following:

- We are living in a *vata*-predominant time, the effects of which are compounded by the fact that most of us lead a fast-paced, hectic and thus further *vata*-aggravating life-

style. The majority of people are stressed, over-worked, exhausted and without sufficient support, which accounts for the common lack of grounding, stability and immunity (all qualities of healthy *kapha*, which is presently lacking). Because the quantity of *vata* is excessively increased in most living beings today, it is virtually impossible in Ayurvedic practice to diagnose 'too little *vata*' (although *vata* may be detected as functionally deficient).



- An important physical reason for VAT is *khavaigunya* or tissue weakness due to bone-specific predisposition and skeletal trauma like fractures, concussions, falls, impact accidents (e.g. whiplash) etc. Any of these compromise the integrity and immunity of bone tissue thus initiating or speeding up the process of degeneration.

- The general lack of support most people experience in their lives is another major factor for degenerative bone conditions and skeletal pathologies. Our skeleton is the core support system that holds the body upright. Because of this direct association with the principle of support, the skeletal system and its state of health are an accurate reflection of how much a person is/feels supported in life. For instance, lack of emotional support due to non-functioning relationships as well as low self-esteem stemming from unsupportive beliefs about oneself exert damaging effects on the skeletal support structure just like any physical trauma would. This is because body, mind and emotions are interconnected and directly influence each other. In fact, the physical body is nothing but an outer expression of our internal creative energies. Hence, any problem with support manifests physically in the skeletal system – as an alarm sign and an invitation to change on inner levels the way we create our external reality.

• Information overload is another reason for *vata* aggravation associated with skeletal problems. Most people today are blocked with undigested 'stuff' – physically, mentally and emotionally. For instance, current education systems focus primarily on left-brain input and data accumulation rather than 'digestion' and integration of experience. No amount of information can ever lead to experiential transformation, which is the purpose of life according to Ayurveda. By absorbing ever-increasing quantities of facts and figures without the adequate space to incorporate them constructively into our lives, mental indigestion and stagnation is created. This leads to *vata*-induced low concentration, disturbed focus, anxiety, stress and confusion. Education systems that favour left-brain over right-brain activity promote an imbalance in mental development and thus fail to be true support systems, as they leave people unsupported and unprepared for the challenges of real life, which demand a balanced use of left and right brain. Such lack of support also contributes to the manifestation of skeletal problems.

Ayurveda classifies three main types of VAT: *sandhivata*, *vatarakta* and *amavata*. *Sandhivata* is a collective term for mostly non-inflammatory degenerative disorders of bones and joints. *Vatarakta* can be correlated with gout and *amavata* with rheumatism; both are systemic inflammatory conditions and less prevalent than *sandhivata*. There is also a *sandhivata* sub-classification based on the possible involvement of *ama* in the pathology: one type represents bone degeneration due to *vata* alone; the other degeneration due to additional tissue blockage (*ama*). The differentiation between these two types is crucial in the therapeutic context, yet often overlooked in Ayurvedic practice. Based on the incorrect assumption that *sandhivata* is a pure *vata* disorder and therefore best treated with oleation, some practitioners prescribe copious amounts of oil for their patients to ameliorate the bone degeneration. However, if *ama* is blocking tissues, oil amalgamates with it and thus only increases the already existing blockage, which leads to further *vata* aggravation and consequently more tissue damage.

Therapeutic Approach

As mentioned above, our present time is characterised by excessively increased *vata* as well as blockage due to indigestion and overload on physical, mental and emotional levels. Clearing of such *ama* is imperative and probably the most essential aspect of Ayurvedic health care today. Unless blocks are removed, results can only be temporary and true healing does not occur. It is similar to having to scrape off flaky paint before repainting a wall in order to prevent everything peeling off shortly after. Any new creation requires a clear space first, which in Ayurvedic treatment terms means: *langhana* (lightenting) before *brhamana* (building). This is a necessary approach for most conditions, but certainly in the case of bone degeneration, because the majority of VAT patients today present with variants of *ama*-associated *sandhivata*. If *ama* blocks are not removed, an existing *vata* disturbance is further amplified, which results in more progressive tissue degeneration. Also, bone is a *gambhira* (deep-seated) tissue, so cannot be reached by any therapy unless the pathways are clear.

Treatment

Ayurveda can treat degenerative skeletal disorders with

good results: pain and stiffness usually lessen or disappear and flexibility greatly improves. In cases of osteoporosis even a remission to normal bone density can be achieved with appropriate treatment, although this tends to be a long process. Generally speaking, all VAT conditions require from patients a dedicated commitment to continuous treatment over a minimum of two to five years (depending on severity and stage of disease) in order for Ayurvedic therapy to be effective and achieve long-lasting results. The following treatments have proved particularly useful and supportive:

- *Amapachana* in the digestive tract is a prerequisite for any treatment of deeper tissues. Diet should be *ama*-reducing to remove any accumulated residues of improper digestion, and also *agni*-increasing to ensure that no new *ama* is formed. Wheat, red meat, yogurt, raw and microwaved foods are the most blocking and must be avoided. Regular fasting on mung soup for several days is a safe and simple, yet very efficient way of removing digestive *ama* and increasing *agni*. The most effective way, of course, is *panchakarma*.

- Single herbs & multi-ingredient formulations such as ginger, turmeric, neem, triphala, trikatu and Avipattikar help remove *ama* from the digestive tract as well as from deeper tissues

- Shallaki (boswellia), sariva, ashwaghandha, Turmeric and Boswellia Formula and Kaishore Guggul reduce *vata* and improve the health of bone and joints.

- Dry *pindasweda* is a very supportive treatment for most VAT cases. The boluses should be filled with ajwain and ginger powder, as these are particularly effective in helping to remove *ama*, increase circulation and reduce *vata*, thus relieving pain, swelling and stiffness. As this type of *pindasweda* has a drying effect, the skin should be protected by massaging a little bit of oil on the area before treatment. This can be done even in VAT cases where *ama* is implicated, since only minimal oil is needed to moisturise the skin. The only exceptions are rheumatoid conditions where no oil should be used at all.



- *Abhyanga* is indicated, beneficial and safe in all VAT conditions where *ama* is not involved in the pathology or has already been eliminated sufficiently.

- Castor oil, when taken internally at night before bed with warm water, is an excellent remedy for balancing *vata* systemically and keeping bone and joints lubricated and supple. However, only 1 tsp. should be taken. This is a safe and sufficient dose to create the above results. If more is taken, castor oil produces a laxative effect, which is not recommended over long periods of time. Ayurvedic texts consider castor oil the strongest *vata*-reducing oil and symbolically compare it to a 'powerful lion that can drag even the big elephant (*vata*) out of the jungle'. Some *vaidyas* recommend that everyone over the age of 40 should take

1 tsp. of this 'fountain of youth' daily to preserve lifelong flexibility. Because of the well-known versatility and healing power of castor oil, it used to be also called Palma Christi (hand of Christ) in Europe.

- Bone density increase can be achieved with gentle weight-bearing exercise and regular intake of sesame, which is an excellent bone builder due to its perfect ratio of required ingredients: bio-available calcium, bitter substances and oil (dairy products lack these and therefore do not increase bone density!). As a daily home remedy: crush 1 tsp. of black sesame seeds, soak over night in 30-40ml water and take everything in the morning on empty stomach at least 20 minutes before breakfast.

- Grounding lifestyle measures like daily meditation and regular retreats, holidays, rest or silence periods are effective ways of calming and balancing *vata*. If properly integrated into life, they create an inner foundation of support that also protects the skeletal system.

- Process work is required to deal with long-standing and deeply rooted issues or blocks. *Panchakarma* is a retreat-type of process work that focuses mainly on physical clearing, but also addresses mental and emotional levels if conducted appropriately and over several weeks. Issues with ongoing lack of support due to low self esteem and relationship problems require process work which directly deals with uncompleted past experiences to help release the associated emotional holding and any unconstructive beliefs.

Finally, feeling young or old has nothing to do with age: the differentiator here is flexibility. Someone aged 20 who is rigid, is 20 years old. Whoever is flexible on physical, mental and emotional levels can be 100 years young. The key to flexibility is the continuing management of *vata*: through clearing blocks and maintaining this catabolic *dosha* at normo-physiological levels. This creates grounding, support and a vibrant sense of youthfulness – as well as healthy bones.

**“A merry heart doeth a man good,
while a broken spirit drieth the bones.”**
(King Solomon, Proverbs 17:22)

Q & A

I have great difficulty getting to sleep at night, especially if I have been working late on the computer. What will help me wind down before bedtime?

To calm the nervous system drink 1 cup warm milk with a pinch of nutmeg and cinnamon, massage your feet with warm sesame oil to draw the energy from your head downwards. Take Pukka's organic Ashwagandha & Valerian capsules 2 x 3 times daily or 3 mid afternoon and 3 before bed.

My job is very stressful at the moment, my mind feels very busy and I am finding it very difficult to focus on my work. What would you recommend?

For clarity of mind, calmness and improved focus put 2 drops of Pukka's organic Brahmi oil in each nostril twice daily. To strengthen the mind and optimise brain function, also take Pukka's organic Brahmi capsules 2 x 3 times daily.



I suffer from recurrent parasite infections. I am aware that my diet is not the best, but what can you suggest?

Parasites and worms thrive when there is a compromised digestive system. To strengthen your digestive fire (agni) it is essential that you eat a light diet with no snacking. Add herbs and spices while cooking, especially turmeric, to assist digestion and assimilation. Pumpkin seeds are known to help clear parasites so include them in your daily diet. Take Pukka's organic Neem capsules 2 x 3 times daily before food and 2-3 Triphala capsules before bed.

