

By SHANNON SEXTON

In Pursuit of Healthiness

Nourishing foods, daily massage, gentle detox—this spiritually infused healing system is

When Joe Santabarbara*, an athletic, type A television producer in Dallas, Texas, reached his mid-30s, his health began to unravel. “I developed all sorts of bizarre symptoms,” he recalls. “Liver pain, crushing fatigue, restless legs syndrome, itchiness, hypoglycemia. I had to start working from home because I couldn’t stay awake for two or three hours after meals.”

A nutritionist discovered the source of his problems through a series of blood tests: Joe had hepatitis C (HCV), a blood-borne virus that becomes chronic in 70 to 80 percent of infected patients and often leads to liver disease, along with muscle and joint pain, mood swings, headaches, sleep disorders, fevers, and digestive problems. Like many of the estimated 4.1 million Americans infected with HCV, Joe doesn’t know when or where he got the infection. Most people are symptom-free for years before the virus takes its toll.

After researching allopathy’s standard but severe treatment with the drugs interferon and ribavirin, which can cause a flu-like syndrome, cardiovascular complications, and psychiatric problems, Joe decided to try alternative treatments like Chinese medicine and macrobiotics—but the effects were short-lived. “I knew I had the self-discipline to do whatever it took to heal,” he says, “but I needed a road map.”

Then Joe heard about the Ayurvedic Institute in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Founded by the world-renowned doctor of ayurvedic medicine Vasant Lad, the Ayurvedic Institute is one of the leading ayurvedic health spas and schools in the U.S. In March 1998, Lad diagnosed Joe



HELPING HANDS Dynamic oil massage is a mainstay in panchakarma.

with a case of excess *pitta*—a subtle energy that can cause people to mentally and physically overheat when it’s out of balance. And hepatitis C, Lad noted, is a classic *pitta* condition. Lad said that by adding yoga, a cooling diet, and an herbal regimen to his daily routine, Joe could quell his symptoms. But first, he should participate in a five-day *panchakarma* (PK) treatment.

An ancient cleansing and rejuvenation program, panchakarma is a series of individualized therapeutic treatments that clear *ama* (toxins) and excess *doshas* (subtle energies) from the deep tissues of the body. According to ayurveda’s ancient texts, PK can both prevent and cure disease, and it is particularly successful with chronic illnesses that allopathy hasn’t


conquered, such as allergies, arthritis, chronic fatigue syndrome, and migraines. On a deeper level, panchakarma can increase an individual’s sense of clarity and inner peace. That’s why yoga practitioners have used it to improve the quality of their spiritual practices for centuries.

Although Joe had never done yoga before, he was willing to give PK a try. He could afford the \$2,000 fee, and the treatments were luxurious. Every morning for five days, he was slathered in warm aromatic oil

by two massage therapists standing at the left and right side of his body, mirroring each other’s strokes. He then sat in a square white fiberglass steam box for a sweat treatment. Next he rested face-up on a table as a technician poured a thin, continuous stream of warm oil between his eyebrows from a copper vessel, then dusted his body with a sweet-smelling mixture of sandalwood-rose powder and chickpea flour. By the end of these treatments, Joe’s mind was quiet and his muscles had melted into profound relaxation.

According to ayurvedic theory, these preparatory procedures liquefy the body’s impurities and push them toward the gastrointestinal tract. Joe’s main panchakarma treatment, which began on the third day,

*Not his real name

A photograph of a man sitting in a meditative pose on a large, light-colored rock. He is positioned in the upper right quadrant of the frame. In the foreground, a waterfall cascades down a dark rock face, creating a large splash of white water. The background shows more of the rocky landscape and the continuation of the waterfall. The overall scene is serene and natural.

just what the ayurvedic doctor ordered. Here's what panchakarma can do for you.

CLEANING UP *As your body and mind are purified, your yoga practice—and your life—will begin to shine.*

was a mild daily enema with herbs specific to pitta and liver function to help the impurities exit his body. In the afternoons and evenings Joe rested, took gentle yoga classes, and attended lectures on ayurveda.

“Panchakarma had a profound emotional, physical, psychological effect on me,” he says. “By the end of the program I felt ten years younger.” Hoping for scientific proof, Joe tested the efficacy of panchakarma through blood work. “I asked my lab to do a basic blood chemistry profile and a hepatitis C viral load test the day before I started panchakarma and then a few weeks after my treatments were over,” he says. The results were impressive: The first profile revealed that Joe’s viral load was in the low range at 297,086 virons per milliliter, but that an abnormal number of his liver cells were dying daily. After PK, his viral load decreased by over 100,000 virons per milliliter, and his liver cells returned to normal.

In the weeks and months that followed, Joe’s energy gradually improved, and some of his excess pitta symptoms, such as irritability and itchiness, began

to subside. Inspired, he began to follow Lad’s road map to health: eating a diet of bitter, cooling, protein-rich foods (avoiding hot, spicy, sour fare); taking pitta-pacifying herbs; reducing his intake of alcohol and coffee; self-administering mild oil enemas; exercising moderately; and practicing specific asanas.

At Lad’s suggestion, Joe returned for panchakarma every few months for four years. Each time that Joe repeated his pre- and post-PK blood work, the tests showed a substantial decrease in his viral load and a rebalancing of his liver enzymes. And it wasn’t just PK that affected his blood chemistry. In December 1999, he intentionally abandoned all of Lad’s lifestyle advice for 60 days, then repeated the blood tests. His viral load skyrocketed to over 1,500,000 virons per milliliter and his liver cells began dying off again in abnormal numbers. That was enough to convince Joe that the lifestyle changes had a profound effect on his health. (One month later, after another five-day panchakarma treatment, his viral load plummeted by 1,100,000 virons per milliliter and his liver enzymes normalized yet again.)

Joe returned to his ayurvedic lifestyle, and although his HCV symptoms didn’t subside immediately, his fatigue, digestive problems, and hypoglycemia disappeared over the course of three years. Then his restless legs syndrome faded away. To this date, Joe has gone to PK 17 times and tries to follow his road map with an attitude of moderation. “I know what’s good and bad for me, and I try to make good choices more than 50 percent of the time,” he says. “My viral load has stayed in the low to medium-low range for the last four or five years, and my liver enzymes have all stayed within the normal range. I have not been able to clear the virus, but I’m completely symptom-free. None of my Western doctors have admitted it’s possible that panchakarma and ayurvedic lifestyle changes could produce such dramatic results, but I have the empirical data to prove it.”

Senior editor and former Everyday Ayurveda columnist Shannon Sexton lives and studies at the Himalayan Institute in Honesdale, Pennsylvania.

{ WARNING }

Participation in a clinical panchakarma requires close supervision by an ayurvedic expert at all times, says Julia Mader, co-founder of Rasayana Cove Ayurvedic Retreat in Central Florida. If your body isn’t properly prepared for cleansing, or if your treatments are incorrectly administered, you can overwhelm your nervous system or dislodge more toxins than your body can handle.

There are other precautions to consider. “Ayurveda has evolved over thousands of years,” Mader explains. “Now it’s coming to America and people are making a lot of money off of it.” In the process, however, some practitioners are abandoning important precautions, such as residential care, dietary restrictions, and lifestyle adjustments to cut costs and increase their profits. Make sure your PK practitioner is well qualified and makes your well-being the highest priority, she says.

Have patience in the process. As Mader observes, “I receive a lot of requests for PK from people who just want to get cleansed very quickly—that’s the American way. But ayurveda is gentle, soft, and slow. In panchakarma, we’re trying to create a gentle wave of cleansing, not a tsunami.” When treatments are too severe, she says, the body holds onto ama even more resolutely, and can push toxins deeper into your system instead of releasing them.

CLEANSING IN A TOXIC WORLD

Many ayurvedic experts believe that even healthy people need regular panchakarma treatments today because our environment is so polluted. According to research cited by Maharishi Ayurveda, up to 100,000 synthetic chemicals (including PCBs, dioxins, and pesticides like DDT/DDE) are used



HERBAL DUSTING *This nourishing treatment absorbs oil.*

{ 6 PANCHAKARMA CLINICS YOU CAN TRUST }

The Ayurvedic Institute in Albuquerque, New Mexico, 505-291-9698 ext. 117, www.ayurveda.com

Kanyakumari Ayurveda Education & Retreat Center, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 414-228-7145, www.kanyakumari.us

Himalayan Institute, Center for Health and Healing, in the Poconos of north-eastern Pennsylvania, 570-253-5551 ext. 3100, www.himalayaninstitute.org/chh

Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health, in the Berkshires of western Massachusetts, 800-741-7353, www.kripalu.org

Living Ayurveda, in Monterey, California, 877-777-1127, www.livingayurveda.com

Rasayana Cove Ayurvedic Retreat, on a nature reserve in Central Florida, 863-494-7565, www.ayurvedicretreat.com

in modern industrial and agricultural processes. Traces of these chemicals pervade our food, water, air, and even our own bodies, and some are associated with allergies, reproductive disorders, certain types of cancer, and other diseases.

Scientific research suggests that many environmental toxicants are fat soluble and become lodged in the lipid layers of our cells. In a two-month longitudinal study conducted in 1998 at the Raj Maharishi Ayurvedic Health Spa in Fairfield, Iowa, PK helped lighten the body's toxic load of all 18 participants by reduc-

and rejuvenating program for the body, mind, and consciousness," he says.

PANCHAKARMA UNVEILED

How does PK work? First, an ayurvedic practitioner determines whether you are strong enough to withstand a cleansing regimen, and rules out contraindications such as hypertension, congestive heart failure, and (for women) pregnancy and menstruation. Then he or she assesses your current body-mind state (*vikriti*) and compares it to the unique ayurvedic constitution with which you were born (*prakriti*).

Ayurvedic massage soothes, softens, and saturates your body and mind with nourishing herbalized oils.

ing the level of several fat-soluble pesticide compounds, including beta-HCH and certain PCBs, by an average of approximately 50 percent compared to controls.

According to the ayurvedic tradition, PK has a host of other benefits. As Lad explains, "panchakarma removes free radicals, balances cholesterol and triglycerides, regulates blood pressure, and introduces antioxidant enzymes into the body. And because it's a wonderful source of stress management, panchakarma can even prevent heart attacks, stroke paralysis, and cancer." PK can also slow the aging process and enhance vitality and mental clarity. It's a "cleansing

Both your prakriti and vikriti are a unique blend of the three doshas—*vata*, *pitta*, and *kapha*—and numerous factors can disrupt their delicate balance. As Lad explains, "The wrong diet, habits, and lifestyle, along with seasonal changes, repressed emotions, and stress factors can...change the balance of vata, pitta, and kapha... which affects *agni*, the gastric fire, and produces *ama*, or toxins."

Ama clogs us on all levels and, when left unchecked, becomes the breeding ground for disease. Described in ayurvedic texts as cold, heavy, wet, and sticky, it develops from environmental toxins and internal toxins generated by poorly assimilated food. If you have high cholesterol,



SHIRODHARA Warm herbalized oil soothes and calms.

hardened arteries, tooth tartar, a coated tongue, joint pain, body odor, or excess mucus, you have the physical symptoms of ama. Energetically, it lurks in the system as fatigue; mentally, ama creates dullness, irritability, and greed. According to ayurveda, PK addresses the root causes of disease by

removing years of accumulated ama (along with excess vata, pitta, and/or kapha) and fine-tuning your agni. The job of your ayurvedic practitioner is to tailor a program to rebalance your body and mind.

Traditionally ayurveda recommends doing PK at the junction between each season to clear out impurities generated during the previous season and help you transition smoothly into the next. Lad says that early spring is always a good time to do PK because it can help reduce your sensitivity to pollen and prevent colds.

Panchakarma is a three-stage process that typically lasts for three to ten days in Western ayurvedic clinics. The preparatory phase begins with internal oleation,

during which you will drink increasing amounts of ghee (clarified butter) in the early morning and afternoon to lubricate the body's subtle channels, or *srotas*. Next, your ayurvedic practitioner will ask you to

seated ama in the body's seven tissues, or *dbatus*. A daily therapeutic sweat treatment (often in the form of a steam bath) further loosens impurities and dilates the *srotas*, so the ama and excess doshas can

But *basti* (medicated enema) is perhaps the most profound. According to an ancient text called the *Charaka Sambita*, *basti* provides a full 50 percent of PK's benefits. The colon is the seat of vata, and

Pancha karma removes free radicals, balances cholesterol, regulates blood pressure, and enhances vitality.

go on a "sensory diet," avoiding TV, loud music, drastic weather conditions, strenuous exercise, travel, and sexual activity for the length of your treatment. You'll also be asked to avoid sugar, caffeine, and alcohol, and to eat light, warm, cleansing dishes like *kitchari* (basmati rice and mung dal cooked with spices and ghee). As Lad explains, "During panchakarma, your agni, or digestive fire, becomes low. *Kitchari* is the best food to eat because it is easy to digest, burns ama, detoxifies the body, and balances the doshas."

The next step is external oleation. Each day, you receive a deep ayurvedic massage that softens and saturates your body with nourishing herbalized oils tailored to your needs. Then a gentle stream of oil is dripped onto your forehead to release mental and emotional strain. These procedures liquefy deep-

move toward the gastrointestinal tract. Within three to seven days, your ayurvedic practitioner will sense that your excess doshas and ama have become "ripened" and are ready to be released via your main panchakarma treatments.

Traditionally, PK comprises five main procedures, or *karmas*, that your practitioner can choose from, but since Westerners often find *vamana* (therapeutic vomiting) and *raktamoksha* (blood purification through herbs or mild bloodletting) too unpleasant to try, only three are common in the States. *Nasya* involves putting medicated drops of herbalized oil or powders into the nose to treat diseases of the head, including colds, toothaches, and migraines. *Virechana* uses strong purgatives to cleanse the small intestine and cure excess pitta problems such as hyperacidity, colitis, and skin diseases.

when this dosha is out of balance, it plays a key role in the development of disease. Recognizing that the colon provides nourishment to the entire body, just like roots for a tree, Charaka wrote, "Basti works from head to toe." It treats all vata disorders, including constipation, back pain, arthritis, osteoporosis, and impotence.

After your main treatments are over, your ayurvedic practitioner will guide you through "post-procedures" to help you reap the full benefits of panchakarma. Because your digestive system (agni) rests during PK, it's important to transition back to your regular diet slowly and carefully. If you overload your agni with heavy foods, you'll generate new ama and the disease process will start all over again. You'll also need to protect the delicate state of your nervous system by gradually easing into your regular, workaday

{ TRY THIS AT HOME }

If you'd like a glimpse into the benefits of panchakarma without the expense of going to a clinic, try this home version, which Lad recommends in The Complete Book of Ayurvedic Home Remedies. Avoid this program if you are pregnant, weak, anemic, or debilitated. Otherwise, it's safe for most healthy people.

Getting Started First, you need to determine your ayurvedic constitution, which is composed of the three doshas. In most people, one dosha is primary, another is secondary, and the third is least prominent. (If you're new to ayurveda, take a dosha test. Go to www.YogaPlus-Extras.org and click on "Panchakarma Prep." You can also find a *kitchari* recipe, instructions for *basti*, dietary guidelines for your constitution, and advice on where to find herbal ingredients.)

Ideally you should undertake this mini-program during a week-



long vacation so that you can escape your daily grind. If you have a hectic family life, rent a cabin in the woods where you can observe silence. Avoid excess stimulation (including sex) and spend your time resting, walking in nature, reading light material, and practicing gentle yoga and meditation. At the minimum, do days 1 to 3 during the workweek and days 4 to 8 over a long weekend.

A word of caution: According to Lad, this program releases old, unresolved emotions stored in our deep connective tissue. To cope, he says, avoid the urge to resuppress them and practice regular meditation to soothe your heart and soul.

Days 1-3 Drink 2 ounces of warm ghee in the early morning (if you have high blood levels of cholesterol, triglycerides, or sugar, replace the ghee with 2 tablespoons of flaxseed 15 minutes before meals for three days). Vata-dominant people should add a pinch of



DOUBLE THE PLEASURE Two masseuses work together on a PK patient using synchronized strokes.

life. Your practitioner will send you home with your own road map to healing.

As Lad explains, “The purpose of panchakarma is not just to get well but to purify and strengthen the body so that future diseases will not occur.” That’s why he recommends doing *rasayana* (rejuvenative

herbal therapy) once you’ve regained your strength. He offers a metaphor for ayurveda’s philosophy of cleansing and rejuvenation: “If you want to color your shirt, wash it first, then dye it so the color will shine. Your body is the shirt, panchakarma is the washing, and rasayana is the dyeing.”

rock salt to their ghee, while kapha-dominant people should add a pinch of trikatu. Follow your dosha-pacifying diet. Every night, put $\frac{1}{2}$ to 1 teaspoon of triphala powder into a cup and add $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of boiling water, steep for 10 minutes, then drink. This is a mild but nourishing laxative.

Days 4–5 Eat only kitchari for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Drink a tea specific to your dominant dosha (see sidebar). At bedtime, massage your body for 15 to 20 minutes with 8 ounces of warm organic oil (sesame oil for vata, sunflower oil for pitta, and corn oil for kapha). Rest for a few minutes to let your skin absorb the oil, then take a hot shower or bath. Scrub your body with natural soap but allow some oil to remain on your skin. Then take your dose of triphala and head to bed.

Days 6–8 Continue your regimen of kitchari and tea, evening massage and shower, and triphala. At bedtime, boil 1 tablespoon of the ayurvedic herbal compound *dashamoola* in 2 cups of water for 5 minutes. After it has cooled to body temperature, strain it and use the liquid as a basti. Try to retain the liquid for at least 30 minutes—overnight if possible—before visiting the bathroom.

{ YOUR DOSHIC TEA }

Steep $\frac{1}{2}$ to 1 teaspoon of your dosha-appropriate tea for 5 minutes, then drink.

Vata Tea — equal parts ground ginger, cumin, and coriander

Pitta Tea — equal parts ground cumin, coriander, and fennel

Kapha Tea — equal parts ground ginger and cinnamon, and a pinch of clove

Once your body has been purified, it is more prepared to accept these rejuvenative therapies, which nourish the body’s tissues and “enhance spiritual vitality,” writes ayurvedic expert Sunil Joshi in *Ayurveda and Panchakarma*. Joshi explains the most profound elements of PK: “When the false covering of ill health is removed from the mind, senses, and body, our true nature, or prakriti, shines through and is intimately connected to the universal prakriti.” For this reason, panchakarma can help anyone on the yogic path, whether they practice asana, pranayama, meditation, or all of the above.

Days 9–12 and beyond... Congratulations: Your main panchakarma program is over. On Day 9, add steamed vegetables to your kitchari. Gradually transition to a heartier diet by adding unyeasted breads and more vegetables to your meals, then return to your doshic diet.

“To make your rejuvenation more effective, set some time aside to build up your strength,” says Lad. “Whether you take a weekend, a week, a month, or even longer, use the time as a purposeful period of rest, relaxation, and rebuilding of body, mind, and spirit.” During this period of time, he advises getting plenty of rest, observing celibacy, and practicing yoga and meditation regularly. You can also take one of the following rasayanas in the morning and at night for 30 to 60 days: For vata, take 1 teaspoon of *ashwagandha* in 1 cup of hot milk; for pitta, take 1 teaspoon of *shbatavari* in 1 cup of warm milk; and for kapha, take 1 teaspoon of *purnarnava* in 1 cup of warm milk. And continue taking triphala for two to three months.

Over time, this mini-PK will deepen your self-awareness, self-esteem, and self-love. As your body and mind are increasingly purified, your yoga practice—and your life—will begin to shine. And that’s what ayurveda, the science of longevity, is all about. +