

Weight Management Herbs for Yoga Practitioners

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Yoga is the practice of balance. Many of us are reminded daily of our excesses when attempting a twisting pose and a huge roll of flesh on our hips or abdomen gets right in the way. We know it's important to limit the amount of unnecessary fat on our body in order to lighten the body and allow for maximum vitality and range of movement in our asana practice. And yet, there it is. In traditional Ayurveda each constitutional body type is said to have both its virtues and its weaknesses - not excluding lean body types either. Body fat is a product of our Kapha dosha, comprised of the elements earth and water and which generates the physical substances and structures of the body. By virtue, the Kapha dosha is grounding in nature and stabilizes our being, however, an excess of Kapha in the form of fat can be obstructive and weigh us down in our lives and in our yoga practice.

The challenge of excessive Kapha dosha, like fat, is that the more you have the more difficult it is to get rid of. Kapha impairs our basic metabolism, restricts our circulation and adds unnecessary weight to our practice. Strong practices such as Asthanga and vinyasa (flow) styles generate the needed tapas (heat) and sweating necessary to counteract Kapha accumulation. They stoke our internal fire, increase Pitta dosha and facilitate the burning of excess body fat through a simple process known to sports physiologists as thermogenesis. Thermogenesis involves a natural intensification of the metabolism resulting in a conversion of fat into heat.

In addition to practicing stronger forms of yoga, there are several herbs which can be safely used in conjunction with our yoga practice to support the process of weight loss. One such class of herbs are known literally as thermogenics. They induce thermogenesis and increase the conversion of fat into heat. Bitter orange (citrus aurantium), the mature fruit of the green orange, is one of the safest and works by increasing the metabolic rate, generating heat and stimulating the breakdown of fat (lipolysis). A word of caution about most thermogenic substances: avoid substances with thermogenic properties that also stimulate the central nervous system such as coffee, tea, yerba mate and ephedra (ma huang). As an alternative, bitter orange has thermogenic properties yet has none of the unwanted side effects of inferior herbs such as high blood pressure, insomnia and nervous agitation.

Another herb used in weight management is the Ayurvedic herb *Gymnema sylvestre*. Its Hindi name, *Gumar*, translates as "sugar destroying", revealing its ability to reduce blood sugar levels and even anaesthetize the sweet sensing taste buds, thus reducing sweet cravings and appetite. Foods rich in refined carbohydrates are known to be one of the primary cause of obesity and type II diabetes. *Gymnema* has great potential for yogis and other athletes because long term use of the herb results in a higher ratio of muscle mass to body fat due to increased insulin production.

Guggul is another herb highly recommended by Ayurvedic practitioners to purify and rejuvenate the body. Its weight reducing properties stem from its ability to lower high blood cholesterol and triglycerides via a thyroid stimulating effect. A plant resinous exudate similar to myrrh, *guggul* reduces Kapha and many of its undesirable and excessive manifestations within the body, and only slightly increases Pitta.

Siberian ginseng should also be mentioned in relation to weight loss and yoga practice. The herb has the unique ability to convert fat tissue back into carbohydrate in the blood. This serves the obvious function of reducing fat reserves, but additionally it provides needed fuel in our muscle tissue for both immediate energy and endurance during strong yoga practices.

If you are a Kapha type, you may find it difficult to tap into your energy reserves during strong practices, and yet you need them most of all. That is the nature of Kapha. Many of the obstacles in your practice will resolve with the gradual loss of extra body weight. Fat will transform to muscle, energy will return, and asanas requiring twisting or reaching around the hips or thighs will gradually become easier as less body mass gets in the way. Try a stronger practice and expect it to be challenging. Make sure you break a sweat. Many of the above herbs will support you and if you are persistent, the weight will come off.