Editorial Article

Gut Harmony and Digestive Health: Integrating the Principles of Grahani Chikitsa

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Submission: 03.09.2026 Publication: 23.09.2026
https://www.doi.org/10.63778/PDEASIJRAAS-ARJCPL/2026_23901

Introduction

Digestive health is increasingly recognized as a fundamental determinant of overall physiological well-being. Beyond its primary role in digestion, nutrient absorption, and metabolism, the gastrointestinal system participates in immune regulation, neuroendocrine signalling, and communication with the central nervous system. Emerging research on the gut–brain axis and intestinal microbiome has further highlighted the complex relationship between gastrointestinal function, psychological health, and systemic homeostasis. Among the commonly encountered gastrointestinal disorders, irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) represents a significant clinical challenge owing to its multifactorial pathophysiology, variable clinical presentation, recurrent symptoms, and impact on quality of life[1,2].

While contemporary medicine approaches IBS as a disorder of gut–brain interaction, Ayurveda offers a holistic understanding of digestive disturbances through the concepts of Agni, Ama, Dosha, and Grahani. The classical therapeutic framework of Grahani Chikitsa, described in the fifteenth chapter of Charaka Samhita, Chikitsa Sthana, provides an interesting perspective on the maintenance and restoration of digestive function[3]. Revisiting these principles through the framework of contemporary gastrointestinal science may offer opportunities for interdisciplinary research and the development of patient-centred integrative healthcare approaches.

Grahani and the central role of Agni in Ayurveda

In Ayurveda, Agni represents the fundamental principle responsible for digestion, transformation, and metabolism. Its balanced functioning is considered essential for maintaining health, vitality, nourishment, and physiological equilibrium. Charaka Samhita emphasizes the importance of Dehagni in sustaining life and maintaining the normal functioning of bodily tissues[4].

Grahani is described as the anatomical and functional site associated with the retention of food until its appropriate digestion and subsequent release. Its physiological integrity is closely dependent on the proper functioning of Agni. Impairment of digestive capacity, particularly Agnimandya, may result in disturbances in digestion and assimilation, eventually contributing to the manifestation of Grahani Dosha.

Classical Ayurvedic descriptions recognize different states of impaired Agni, including Mandagni, Vishamagni, and Tikshnagni, reflecting variations in digestive function. The associated clinical manifestations may include abdominal discomfort, altered bowel habits, irregular appetite, bloating, indigestion, and incomplete digestion. These manifestations demonstrate certain clinical similarities with functional gastrointestinal disorders, particularly IBS. However, Grahani Dosha and IBS belong to distinct diagnostic systems, and their similarities should be interpreted as a basis for clinical correlation and research rather than diagnostic equivalence[3,4].

Irritable bowel syndrome: Understanding the contemporary perspective

IBS is a chronic disorder of gut–brain interaction characterized by recurrent abdominal pain associated with changes in bowel habits, including diarrhoea, constipation, or alternating patterns. Its pathophysiology is multifactorial, involving alterations in gastrointestinal motility, visceral hypersensitivity, intestinal permeability, gut microbiota, immune signalling, and psychosocial factors[1,5].

The relationship between the gastrointestinal tract and the central nervous system plays a particularly important role in the clinical expression of IBS. Stress, anxiety, emotional disturbances, altered sleep patterns, and dietary triggers may influence symptom severity and recurrence. Consequently, contemporary management increasingly emphasizes individualized treatment strategies that address gastrointestinal symptoms alongside psychological and lifestyle-related factors[5,6].

The intestinal microbiome has also emerged as an important area of investigation. Variations in microbial composition and function may influence fermentation, short-chain fatty acid production, intestinal barrier function, and immune responses. Although the precise contribution of microbiome alterations to IBS remains an evolving area of research, these findings provide an opportunity to explore the relationship between digestive health and the Ayurvedic concepts of Agni and Ama[7].

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Grahani Chikitsa: An integrative therapeutic framework

The principles of Grahani Chikitsa extend beyond symptomatic treatment and emphasize the restoration of digestive function through individualized dietary, therapeutic, and lifestyle interventions. The approach primarily focuses on Agni Deepana (supporting digestive capacity), Ama Pachana (addressing the Ayurvedic concept of incompletely processed metabolic products), and the regulation of disturbed Doshas.

The selection of therapeutic interventions is traditionally guided by the patient's constitution (Prakriti), disease manifestation, digestive capacity, bowel characteristics (Koshtha), dietary practices, and associated symptoms. Such individualized assessment is particularly relevant when considering the clinical heterogeneity of IBS, which includes constipation-predominant (IBS-C), diarrhoea-predominant (IBS-D), and mixed-subtype (IBS-M) presentations.

Dietary regulation constitutes one of the most important components of Grahani Chikitsa. Ayurveda emphasizes freshly prepared, appropriately portioned, and easily digestible meals, along with regular eating schedules and mindful dietary practices. Traditional dietary preparations such as Yavagu and Manda may be considered according to individual digestive capacity and clinical requirements. Avoidance of unsuitable dietary combinations (Viruddha Ahara), excessive food intake, irregular meal timings, and incompatible lifestyle practices also forms part of the classical approach.

Interestingly, several of these principles find parallels in contemporary nutritional management of IBS. Current clinical guidelines recommend individualized dietary counselling, soluble fibre where appropriate, and a time-limited low-FODMAP dietary intervention for selected patients under professional supervision[8]. These similarities provide an opportunity to investigate the role of traditional dietary practices in gastrointestinal symptom management without assuming that the two systems employ identical physiological mechanisms.

The gut–brain axis: Bridging Ayurveda and modern science

One of the most promising areas for interdisciplinary investigation is the relationship between digestive health and psychological well-being. Contemporary research recognizes the bidirectional communication between the gut and the brain through neural, hormonal, immune, and microbial pathways. Psychological stress can influence gastrointestinal motility, visceral sensitivity, and symptom perception, while persistent gastrointestinal disturbances may further contribute to emotional distress[5,6].

Ayurveda also recognizes the influence of psychological and behavioural factors on physiological health. The concepts of Manasika Bhava, Ahara, Vihara, and the maintenance of equilibrium among the Doshas provide a broader framework for understanding the interaction between lifestyle, mental well-being, and digestive function.

Incorporating appropriate stress-management strategies, yoga, meditation, breathing practices, adequate sleep, and regular physical activity may complement dietary and therapeutic interventions. Contemporary clinical guidelines similarly recognize the potential role of gut-directed psychotherapy and behavioural interventions in managing IBS symptoms[1,2,8].

The possible relationship between Agni, Ama, and contemporary concepts such as altered digestion, microbial imbalance, and metabolic dysfunction deserves further scientific exploration. However, these concepts should not be considered direct biomedical equivalents. Mechanistic investigations are necessary to establish whether measurable physiological relationships exist.

Challenges and future research directions

Despite the growing interest in integrative gastrointestinal healthcare, several research challenges remain. The variability in Ayurvedic diagnostic assessments, individualized treatment protocols, formulations, dosage schedules, and clinical outcome measures makes it difficult to compare findings across studies.

Future research should focus on developing standardized and reproducible clinical protocols for evaluating Grahani Chikitsa in patients with well-defined IBS subtypes. Clinical studies should incorporate internationally accepted diagnostic criteria, validated symptom severity scales, quality-of-life assessments, bowel habit measurements, and appropriate biochemical or microbiome-related parameters.

Furthermore, the safety, quality, and standardization of Ayurvedic formulations require systematic evaluation. Potential herb–drug interactions, product contamination, dosage variability, and long-term safety must be addressed through appropriate pharmacological and clinical investigations.

An integrative model should also preserve the importance of contemporary diagnostic evaluation. Patients presenting with gastrointestinal bleeding, unexplained weight loss, anaemia, persistent fever, or other alarm features require appropriate medical assessment to exclude organic gastrointestinal diseases. Ayurvedic interventions should complement, rather than replace, indicated diagnostic procedures and evidence-based medical treatment.

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Conclusion

Restoring gut harmony requires a comprehensive understanding of digestive physiology, dietary practices, psychological well-being, and individual health determinants. The classical principles of Grahani Chikitsa offer a holistic therapeutic perspective that places Agni, dietary regulation, individualized assessment, and lifestyle modification at the centre of digestive healthcare.

The emerging scientific interest in the gut–brain axis and intestinal microbiome provides an opportunity to revisit these traditional concepts through contemporary research methodologies. Preliminary clinical studies investigating Ayurvedic nutritional therapy and whole-system Ayurveda approaches in IBS offer encouraging directions, although larger and more rigorous clinical trials are necessary to establish their effectiveness and safety.

Ultimately, the integration of classical Ayurvedic knowledge with modern gastrointestinal science should be guided by scientific validation, clinical responsibility, and patient-centred care. Moving beyond symptom management towards a broader understanding of digestive health may create meaningful opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration. Grahani Chikitsa, when investigated through robust clinical and translational research, may contribute to the evolving dialogue on restoring gut harmony and improving digestive well-being.

Source of Support: Nil

Conflict of Interest: Nil

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