

BALANCE MIE

Beauty and wellbeing director, **Eminé Ali Rushton**, shares her journey towards a happier, healthier way of living, built upon the wisdom of Ayurveda

I grew up with the story of my birth: the horror, the pain. The stitches, the tears, the trauma. The blood vessels that burst all over my mother's beautiful 21-year-old face, and the way she sobbed when she saw her own reflection. 'You pushed with your face,' the midwife told her at the time – and she didn't even know what that meant.

They say that you're likely to labour and birth like your mother, and this stuck with me too, of course. So, upon getting pregnant with my first child, I felt I had two options. One, an elective Caesarean – 'I'll take control of this,' was the thinking, 'so that I don't suffer the same fate as my mother.' No pain during labour, no unknowns. The other was something that would instil a sense of calm and belief in me. Make me know that I could do it and that my body would be OK at the end. So, I prayed to the god of Google and found *The Gentle Birth Method* (Thorsons, £16.99). The book,

written by doctor and doula Gowri Motha, talked about preparing the body for birth in the same way that one prepares for a marathon. A way of eating, breathing and thinking that supports the body's own inherent constitution – something called Ayurveda.

WHAT IS AYURVEDA?

It is India's 5,000-year-old science of medicine, pre-dating all complete systems of medicine. Ayurveda is holistic – considering mind, body and spirit with each and every piece of advice. It believes that food is medicine, and that by eating foods that are seasonal, and naturally support our body type, we will flourish. It understands that eating more of the right foods will make us feel happier and eating more of the wrong ones can dull our senses. There are three main *doshas*, or constitutional types: *vata*, *pitta* and *kapha*. Ayurveda believes that we are all made of varying degrees of five elements – air, ether, water, fire and earth. The

doshas are also made up of these elements. It is a symbolic shortcut to understanding how we are 'built' from the minerals that make up our bones and teeth (earth), to the energy in our cells and digestive systems (fire).

Ayurveda believes that being healthy is all about achieving balance within the body. By stabilising those airy, flighty tendencies (*vata*), cooling down excessive heat (*pitta*) and drying out cold and damp (*kapha*, which we experience literally when we have a phlegmy cough), we will harmonise our bodies and be stronger, healthier and more energised – we will be happier, calmer and brighter. And we will also experience *sattva* – that positive and balanced state of mind when we feel we're at 100 per cent.

A PITTA PREGNANCY

So, I sat down, as everyone who begins on the path toward an Ayurvedic life does, with the consultation questionnaire about my body, mind, sleep, skin, >>>

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>>> appetite, ambition, body temperature... insightful, yet incisive, questions that had me nodding along emphatically – yes, yes, this is definitely me! I remember sending my husband a text message, ‘I am a very PITTA pregnant person!’

I learned that I had a lot of fire in my system – prone to skin rashes, sudden flashes of rage, overheating... the more I read about my constitution, and about Ayurveda as a whole, the better I became at eating food that, in my pregnant state, nourished, supported and balanced my body. And my body responded happily and quickly. I had a great pregnancy, tons of energy, and a positive mindset. I started meditating, knowing I would continue to do so up to (and hopefully during!) labour, and to try and keep my mind strong during the contractions.

I woke on my due date, knowing the baby would come that day, and within an hour, contractions had started. I stayed at home, calm and happy, listening to music, meditating and bathing, until the contractions were five minutes apart. The 40-minute drive to the hospital was tough – the pain was very intense, but I did keep my mind focused. Two-and-a-half hours after I arrived at the hospital, my baby was born. The speed caught the midwives out – I was pushing minutes after they told me they’d check me again in four hours. There had been no intervention, no drugs, no gas-and-air. I was walking around with my baby in my arms five minutes later. I was absolutely fine! My mother couldn’t believe it. My husband couldn’t believe it. *I* could hardly believe it! That was when I started to trust in Ayurvedic living, and understand how powerfully it can connect us with our bodies.

LOSING MY WAY

I know that I was also lucky. All the preparation in the world cannot guarantee a good birth. But the way my body responded and healed was a huge surprise. I went home with my little bundle, and planned to continue following an

Ayurvedic way of life. Except, it didn’t happen. What happened was a blur of sleepless nights, elated first smiles, missed meals, mastitis (thrice), guilt, worry and the real, deep, dark blues. I lost my way a bit. It was, after all, the first time in my 30 years that I’d been properly sleep-deprived and it knocked me completely off-kilter.

I know now that my constitution needs seven hours of sleep a night (no more), but any less, and my body burns out very quickly. I should have been eating well to support myself through the tiredness and the despairing fog, but instead, I stopped eating Ayurvedically – although my husband, bless him, continued to cook me healthy, hearty meals whenever he wasn’t working. When

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alone with the baby, who rarely settled, I’d grab some spelt bread and stuff it with whatever I could find, and snacked on corn chips, olives, wedges of cheese and chocolate soya milk (which I craved incessantly). I didn’t have time to stop and reassess. I just carried on and soon, the peace of mind and body I’d had during pregnancy was eclipsed. Then, when I should have been settling into a calmer routine, with the baby at three months old, I returned to work, and my husband took up the full-time parenting role.

Eight months later, in a very busy job, commuting to and from London four days a week, and on an average of three hours’ sleep a night, I had a wake-up call. Food had become something to grab

and go. Yes, I was eating salads and soups, but I was also having the wrong salads (teaming grains with beans and protein – hello stomach upset!), as well as snacking continually to give me enough energy to get to the end of the day, so my digestive fire (which Ayurveda terms *agni*) was never allowed to build or optimise. The office was always full of cupcakes and chocolate, and though I’ve never been one to overdo anything, it was very easy to grab a sugar hit at 4pm, to get me through till 6pm. I was burnt out. My body didn’t feel good. I was so, so tired. My skin was dry. My nails were brittle. Even when the baby slept well (OK, rarely), I didn’t.

That was when Denise Leicester, founder of Ila, told me about the Ila Spa at Landaa Giraavaru in the Maldives. I remember the way her face lit up as she talked about it. I remember imagining myself, lying on a bed in an outdoor treatment room as the warm breeze enveloped me. I remember listening as she described the chakra treatments and their uniquely spiritual efficacy, employing everything from crystal therapy to yoga. Then I remember crying – I imagine many new mums could burst into tears at the thought of being taken to paradise and looked after for a week!

PARADISE REGAINED

The experience surpassed my wildest expectations: it really was paradise with pure, warm unsullied turquoise waters, coral reefs and glitteringly white powder beaches. My villa, atop the sea, was buffeted with waves all day and night, a beautiful lullaby that helped me to sleep.

I arrived in the late afternoon and was greeted by the Ayurvedic doctor leading the retreat. We had our consultation and he knew, as did I, that my pitta/fire element was raging. I needed cooling and calming, and my body needed to wake up, shift the excess pounds, and start to hum again. And my goodness, it did. Within two days of restorative, balancing food, from millet porridge to daal



soup, seasonal vegetable stir-fries and fresh fish, I’d found my mojo. And by the time I left, after six nights, I really was on the path to balance. My body had shifted the extraneous 8lb easily, solely based on the right Ayurvedic diet, and – of course – being rested, destressed and well looked after. I vowed not to let these lessons slip once I returned home.

Four years, another child, and many adventures later, I have learned how to make Ayurveda work for me. I’ve used it to help me avoid illness – by increasing certain foods and spices in autumn and winter, you can get a healing head start. I have used it to calm eczema, to aid my children’s upset tummies. I use it every day, in some way or other, because it’s

part of my life now. Every day I learn more. This is a life-long journey and one I’d like to share. I believe it will help anyone, anywhere without pain, guilt, deprivation, impracticality or expense.

In the words of Sebastian Pole, co-founder of Pukka Herbs, taken from the foreword of my first book, which is a detailed plan for living modern life in an Ayurvedic way: ‘Ayurveda is not a moralistic system at all. It’s completely supportive of our natural individuality and idiosyncrasy. Thank goodness! It is a compassionate guide that helps us to understand what we need, how much, and when.’ It is the foundation of a life that is happier, healthier, calmer and far more optimistic. It is a totally fad-proof

and sage way of eating, living, being. It is moderate and never reactive. We talk about ‘less’ of one thing and ‘more’ of another. Ayurveda is not about all or nothing. It is, actually, very kind.

After 12 years as a wellbeing editor, I know that the only thing that works is a moderate, individual, life-long approach. This has worked for 5,000 years. I owe it a lot, today, every day.

If Ayurveda interests you too, start by working out what your body’s own unique dosha, or constitution, is here: balanceplan.co.uk (the website launches on 2 April).

‘The Body Balance Diet Plan’ by Eminé Ali Rushton (Watkins, £9.99) is out on 16 April and available for pre-order now at amazon.co.uk