

N adī Parīkṣā

Pulse Diagnosis

General instructions for Reading a Pulse



The radial pulse of a client is taken from the radial artery just below the radial tubercle (bony protuberance) below the base of the thumb. The pulse is taken with the opposite hand, with the tips of the index, middle, and ring finger. When the opposite hand is used by the practitioner the index finger is closest to the hand of the client and the ring finger is closest to the heart of the client without reaching over the client's arm. When the pulse is taken from the radial (the thumb side) the practitioner's thumb may rest comfortably under the client's arm supporting the arm which helps to ensure a normal pulse reading. Additional support may be provided by allowing the client's arm to rest on a table (or their knee) and by supporting their hand with the hand not taking the pulse. If the fingers are not kept in the right position along the radial artery, the pulse will not be distinct. The fingers must be held in the right position and closely together while taking a pulse, but if they are held too close together a distinct pulse will not be felt under each finger. With some practice it is easy to find the right position so that a clear and distinct pulse may be felt under each finger. In this way the index finger reads the vāta pulse, the middle finger takes the pitta pulse and the ring finger takes the kapha pulse.

Doṣic Qualities in the Pulse

The presence of each of the doṣas will create distinct characteristics in the pulse. By careful analysis of the pulse the vikṛti may be determined. The qualities of any one of the doṣas in the pulse will indicate the presence of that doṣa in the vikṛti.

Vāta Pulse

The vāta pulse embodies the airy qualities of vāta doṣa. It tends to be very thin and weak though it may also be strong and it will almost always have some fluctuation. It moves in quick unpredictable ways like a slithering snake. Variability is one of the most distinctive features of vāta doṣa in the pulse. When the rate, rhythm, strength, or location of the pulse is variable, this is a sure sign of vāta. The pulse of vāta tends to be the most rapid of all pulses, though it may also move slowly or vary. The pulse of vāta will feel cold and anxious and it may even seem to shiver upon careful analysis. The features of vāta may be noticed in an otherwise healthy seeming pulse when there are slight variations like a slight change of location or the skipping of a beat or a sudden change in the speed or rhythm of the pulse. A vāta pulse is usually felt most distinctly under the index finger.

Pitta Pulse

The pitta pulse is categorized by the fiery qualities of pitta doṣa. It tends to be strong, warm, steady, and pronounced. It has a steady and rapid movement like a hopping frog. Unlike the vāta pulse which varies and unlike the kapha pulse which is very broad and slow the pitta pulse is strong and steady. It has an equal and steady pressure under all fingers. A pitta pulse really pulses out when felt with a strong force. Careful examination will reveal a subtle heat and an intensity like the fiery emotions associated with pitta. It has an easily noticeable sharpness. The pitta pulse is relatively thick and strong, and it seems also to expand or spread like the waves spreading when a rock is thrown into water. The pitta pulse is most like the normal pulse which is felt only in self-realized saints whose consciousness has transcended the body and its doṣas, but it is warmer and more forceful. The force of the pitta pulse makes it the most easily noticeable pulse. A pitta pulse is usually felt most distinctly under the middle finger.

Kapha Pulse

The kapha pulse displays the watery qualities of kapha doṣa. It is cool, slow, heavy, broad, and steady. Its movement is slow and steady like a swimming swan. The kapha pulse is light and cool it may feel somewhat like air bubbles floating up and surfacing on water. Sometimes the kapha pulse can be very light and difficult to feel. It is not erratic or thin like vāta; it is very steady and broad. A kapha pulse does not seem to spread or expand like pitta but instead it is very steady in its width. Compared to a pitta pulse it is slower, weaker, and broader. The kapha pulse is very steady and under each finger it has equal force. Upon close examination the kapha pulse seems cool and even depressed. It may feel as if it is set deep into the flesh as if it needs stimulation to bring it out and speed it up to normal. The qualities of kapha slow and dull and broaden a pulse. A kapha pulse is usually felt most distinctly under the ring finger.

General Pulse Characteristics for the Tridoṣa

	Vāta	Pitta	Kapha
General Qualities	Fast, cold, very feeble, light, thin, disappears with pressure, maybe variable	Strong, prominent, steady, warm, forceful, lifts up the fingers feeling the pulse	Deep, slow, broad, cool or warm, regular, watery, weak, maybe difficult to feel
Location	Best felt at the index finger	Best felt at the middle finger	Best felt at the ring finger
Gati (Movement)	Moves like a Cobra (Sarpa) or a leech (jalaukā)	Moves like a frog (mandūka), sparrow (kuliṅga) or crow (kāka)	Moves like a swimming Swan (hamsa), pigeon (pārāvata), or elephant (gaja)
Vega (Rate)	80-95 beats per minute	70-80 beats per minute	50-60 beats per minute
Tāla (Rhythm)	Irregular, changing, may skip beats	Strong and regular	Regular (but weaker and slower than pitta)
Bala (Strength)	Low, weak	Strong	Moderate to weak (in some cases it is barely perceptible)
Ākr̥ti (Tension and Volume)	Low	High	Moderate
Tapamāna (Temperature)	Cold, or Variable	Warm or Hot	Cool to warm
Kāthinya (Consistency of the vessel wall)	Rough, hard	Elastic, flexible	Soft, Expanding

Levels of the Pulse and Different Hands

It is important when taking a pulse to check different levels of the pulse. When superficial pressure is applied to the radial artery the qualities of the pulse will differ from when deep pressure is applied or moderate pressure. The qualities of one doṣa may be apparent in one level of the pulse (or in one hand) but not there in other levels (or in the other hand). There are many systems used for reading the pulse. Some more detailed systems of āyurvedic pulse diagnosis divide the pulse into seven or more distinct levels. These systems are very intricate and require a great deal of intuition on the part of the practitioner and many years of study to master. These techniques require the instruction and initiation of a Guru. We teach a simple method which checks three levels of the pulse and does not require such sharp intuition. This technique may be learned very easily and quickly (though it still requires some practice). Though this simple technique does not give as much insight into the specific qualities of dis-ease, it does allow for the recognition of doṣas as a part of a general analysis of vikṛti. This technique can be taught easily and learned easily for the purpose of recognizing the vikṛti so that general recommendations can be made for balancing doṣas. This technique does not reveal the pathology of a dis-ease condition and should not be used to diagnose or treat most conditions. It can be used by teachers of Ayurveda or Yoga to give general lifestyle, diet, or exercise recommendations to their students.

When taking a pulse it is a good idea to check three levels of the pulse on both hands. When taking a pulse light pressure should be applied until a pulse is felt. This is the superficial pulse. If heavy pressure is applied until the pulse is blocked by the pressure and then pressure is released slightly until a pulse returns, this is the deep pulse. It is good to check the pulse at the superficial and deep level and at a middle level somewhere in between the two. The qualities of the pulse will be different at these levels in many cases, and therefore it is important to check the pulse at these three levels on both hands to be sure to notice all that the pulse has to tell about the current balance of doṣas. If the superficial pulse is weaker than the deep pulse this could indicate a weakness in the external tissues and a condition which is somewhat more acute. When the deep pulse is weaker than the superficial pulse, this can indicate a weakness of the internal tissues and a condition which is more chronic.

For women the left hand should be checked first because the left side of the body and the iḍā nāḍī will be predominant. The qualities of kapha are usually more evident on the left. For men the right hand should be checked first because the right side of the body and the piṅgala nāḍī will be predominant. The qualities of pitta are usually more evident on the right. A weaker pulse on the left side may indicate a depletion of the kapha organs and a deficiency of ojas. A weaker pulse on the right side may indicate a depletion of the pitta tissues and a deficiency of tejas.

To get a complete picture of the qualities of a pulse, the pulse should be checked on the superficial, middle, and deep level of each hand. Before deciding which doṣas are present in a person's current balance, it is important to factor in the qualities of doṣas evident at each of these positions.

The ideal time to take the pulse is early in the morning up to 10:00 am. The pulse should be taken ideally when a person is calm and at a state of rest. Ideally a person should have eaten no less than 3 hours prior to pulse examination. A client should be asked if they need to use the bathroom and also if they have just used the bathroom. If they need to go to the bathroom they should be encouraged to go, and if they have just gone then some time should be waited before taking the pulse (15 minutes or so). If they seem anxious or distracted it is wise to ask them about the various factors which can effect the pulse.

Factors which can effect the pulse

Eating or drinking (especially foods or drinks which are very strong in one flavor or very hot or cold or stimulants or depressants like coffee, tea, sugar, or alcohol)
Taking drugs, medicines, or narcotics (including cigarettes)
Exercise (especially aerobic exercise)
Having an urge to urinate or defecate
Having just urinated or defecated
Being scared, anxious, nervous, depressed, or angry
Talking or excessive thought

Taking the Pulse is a Meditation

When taking the pulse it is best to get the client to relax, close their eyes, and practice deep calm, normal breathing. The practitioner should also relax and assume a meditative consciousness. It may help for the practitioner to align his inbreath and out breath with that of the client. When his consciousness goes to the pulse, he should open himself to all the feelings, thought, and impressions which come to him. The things which he feels will all give insight into the condition of the client. Intuition is like a fine-tuned attention to detail. It is possible to get wonderfully deep and meaningful information through the pulse when the mind is clear and centered. When the pulse is approached with such a consciousness, it will speak to the practitioner. As his places his awareness on the pulse, the pulse will convey the qualities of the condition. As the detached awareness of the practitioner investigates the pulse, he will feel the qualities of the client's condition in his own body. This meditative awareness, when brought the the pulse and the condition of a person will lift the karma causing dis-ease. It is a truly healing experience to have the pulse examined by an attentive practitioner. It is a process which brings instant healing and instant awareness to the client about his condition, which he may then use in his own process of healing.