

FOOD AS MEDICINE ~ Basic principles of healthful eating

Dietary needs vary from person to person depending on one's constitution, daily activities, and the environment in which one lives. **And** there are some fundamental principles that can guide a healthy relationship to food. The ideas articulated below arise from my understanding of Chinese medical food therapy, my clinical and personal experience. Below is a distillation of these most fundamental points. I have written several versions of this article and will likely continue to produce many drafts of these principles over the course of my life and practice.

Read through them as if sipping a cup of tea or another beverage you enjoy. Take each in and see how it tastes, how it resonate as true for you. Does each one stimulate more questions? You may find answers to some of your questions in additional articles available on my website amycdarling.com.

- ◆ **Eat Food.** Sound simple? Our grocery stores are filled with *food products* (protein bars, candy, chips, crackers, smoothie blends... processed foods galore). Whole foods that are natural and as fresh as possible provide the greatest nutrients to the body.
- ◆ **80~20 rule.** Try to eat what feels healthful at least 80% of the time. Do give yourself the opportunity to indulge in treats and food pleasures.
- ◆ **The digestive system thrives on warm, simple food.** Food which is cooked is easier for the body to digest than raw food.
- ◆ **Cold foods tax the digestive system.**
- ◆ **Regular meal times optimize digestive function.**
- ◆ **Eat some protein at every meal.** Protein takes longer to metabolize, thereby regulating blood sugar, insulin, and the hormones which influence our response to stress. Consuming small to moderate quantities every 3-4 hours will prevent sudden energy drops and reduce anxiety and irritability. Snacking on a single hard boiled egg, yogurt or cottage cheese, a small amount of quinoa, or 10-12 nuts will provide more sustained energy than the readily available muffin or scone.
- ◆ **Our diet generates the blood which moistens and nourishes our body's tissues and organs.** In the absence of proper blood nourishment, the body's *tissues* (this extends to the nails and hair) become like a dry, hard sponge. People who suffer *blood deficiency* experience a variety of problems including musculo-skeletal injuries that fail to heal, insomnia, anxiety, menstrual irregularities and other conditions. See *additional article on Blood Deficiency on my website*.
- ◆ **There is a category of foods known as 发 fā foods** which provoke or exacerbate certain problems, particularly digestive issues and skin conditions. 发 fā literally means to effuse or emit. Imbalances already present in the body are aggravated by these foods. The fā foods are:
 - 🌀 Shellfish 🌀 Tropical fruit 🌀 Chocolate 🌀 Coffee 🌀 Alcohol 🌀
- ◆ **There is a difference between healthy body fluids (saliva, blood, interstitial fluid, lymph) and unhealthy accumulation of dampness and phlegm in the body.** Excess dampness can arise from one's *constitution*, diet, or living environment and can cause or contribute to sinus congestion, respiratory problems, digestive weakness, lethargy, arthritic and other conditions. See *additional article on Dampness on my website*.



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- ◆ **By choosing organic foods, one decreases one's own exposure to chemicals which can harm the body and our environment in the short and long term.** If financially prioritizing which foods to purchase organically, consider the following. Plants do not have a liver by which to remove toxins from the body. They do consolidate chemicals (pesticides, herbicides etc) in their skin and seeds. So if you cannot afford to purchase all of your food organically, try to purchase organic oils, nuts and seeds. When consuming *non-organic* fruits and vegetables, remove the skin or peel. Free range, organically grown meats are most healthy.
- ◆ **Diets that involve fasting or severe caloric restriction slow metabolism and eventually result in weight gain rather than loss.**
- ◆ **How we feel when we eat impacts how we digest our food.** If rushed, distracted, angry or sad while consuming food, this will impact one's ability to be fully nourished.
- ◆ **If we pay attention, our body communicates pretty clearly** (through digestive upset, energy changes, mental clarity and mood) what really provides us the most nourishing fuel for our body, mind and heart.

Having painted these broad brush stroke principles, it feels important to acknowledge that food is a complicated issue for most of us. The prevalence of *disordered eating patterns* (ranging from chronic overeating to episodic bingeing, to anorexia) afflicts the majority of our modern population. We are continually bombarded with images of how we *should* look, what we *should* eat and we are inundated by things to eat which are **not really food**, or aren't particularly nourishing food. This extends from the pastry case at every coffee shop or the coffee shop itself (which while it nourishes our heart and mind, doesn't really do much for the body), to the chips and soda aisle at the grocery store.

In my work with patients, supporting them to explore their relationship to how they nourish their body is often a critical piece of addressing health concerns. For many people, it is very challenging to be honest with themselves about what they're actually consuming in a day. One of the first things I encourage is for people to simply notice what they eat and how they feel. Often the correlations are so striking, the patient returns with observations and insights galore into their own digestive function, energy level, sleeping patterns and mood that arise directly from simply noticing. Jan Chozen Bays, MD and Buddhist teacher has written a powerful and completely accessible book entitled *Mindful Eating: A Guide to Rediscovering a Healthy and Joyful Relationship with Food*. If your relationship with food and your body have been a historic source of struggle, this book is a valuable resource.

It is my deepest desire to support people to explore how they eat in order to feel both healthier and more empowered in relationship to how they nourish themselves. If questions have arisen as you've read this article, I welcome contact from you in the interest of consultation or treatment. Consider this article an invitation into a healthful dialogue with yourself and your body.

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