

Avoiding Damp Accumulation through Food Choices

If you take a walk outside after a heavy rain, which is a common opportunity in the Northwest, you can see pristine clear drops of water dangling from plants and rooftops. You might also see a city drain clogged with leaves and standing water. The same water combined with different factors renders a different result. Now, picture this image inside your body. There is a big difference between healthy body fluids (akin to the pure rain water: saliva, blood, lymph, interstitial fluid) and an unhealthy accumulation of *dampness* (the mess in the clogged drain). And unfortunately pathological *dampness* can't perform the same functions as normal, healthy body fluids. So, how does that pure rain water transform into fluid gunking up our systems?

Excessive *dampness* can accumulate for several reasons - because of one's constitution, diet, lifestyle choices or living environment. A person's constitution is generated by their heredity and the health of their parents (particularly at the time of conception), as well as the health of the mother during pregnancy. One's constitution strongly influences how one is predisposed in personality and health. Some people can hike at high altitudes without a problem, while others are constitutionally deficient in their lungs and suffer with asthma or sinus problems. Some people have an iron stomach while others are prone to digestive distress. We all have an *Achilles heel*. Having an honest sense of one's own constitution, bodily strengths and weaknesses, is a good first step to maintaining optimum health and vitality.

In the Northwest, we live in a climate that's frequently wet and cold. By simply living in this region, our bodies are exposed to dampness all the time. Daily or regular time spent outdoors in the rain (for example: doing construction or landscaping work, or running or biking) further contributes to this exposure.

To understand how what we eat influences *damp* accumulation, let's consider digestion in broad terms for a moment. All food breaks down to fuel the basic functions of the body and mind. When we introduce food and fluids into the body our digestive system sorts out what to keep, what to circulate through the body, and what to eliminate. Some foods act like kindling. They burn quickly and get the fire going. But they don't last long. Kindling foods (grains and breads, refined sugars, most fruits and vegetables) all break down into pretty simple sugars. Other foods are like slow burning briquettes. They take a little longer to get started (digested), but they keep cooking for hours. These include beans and legumes, whole grains to some extent, tofu and tempeh, nuts and seeds, and all animal products. Within these kindling and briquette foods, some burn up like dry, clean wood that's been stored inside a house for months. Others burn like a water-logged branch hauled out of the Olympic rain forest at the end of a long Northwest winter. Foods that burn in this manner are considered damp in nature. Regular consumption of *damp* foods weakens our digestive system, particularly if one lives in a *damp* climate and has an inherently *damp* constitution. When our digestive system is compromised, it doesn't perform very well. It ends up circulating some of the 'trash' that should've been eliminated, and this trash clogs up our lungs, sinuses, skin, digestive system, and joints. A list of foods *damp* in nature is clearly outlined toward the end the article. Additionally, there are notes about how to prepare foods to moderate their *damp* quality.

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When all of the factors described above combine, pathological *dampness* accumulates and can undermine optimal health and cause or contribute to conditions such as:

- Sinus congestion and chronic infections.
- Allergies.
- Respiratory problems.
- Digestive problems.
- Skin conditions.
- Lethargy or heaviness of the body.
- Edema.
- Yeast infections.
- Cysts.
- Arthritic conditions.
- Headaches or absence of mental clarity.

How can you tell whether or not *damp* accumulation or phlegm (further congealed *dampness*) is a problem for you? I've listed several relatively straightforward signs and symptoms that may indicate *damp* accumulation. As you read through, consider whether you have experienced any of these:

- When you look at your tongue in the mirror, can you see the flesh of your tongue cleanly or is it covered by a thick coating (ranging from white to yellow to grey)?
- Do you routinely feel a heaviness or sluggishness in your body, particularly in the morning?
- Do you regularly experience loose stools or diarrhea?
- Do you suffer chronic sinus congestion?
- Are any of your symptoms worse after eating increased amounts of sugar, wheat or dairy?
- Are your symptoms worse when it rains?

If you're wondering how making changes in your diet might influence your symptoms, here are some examples of what patients have learned through their own observation. An elder gentleman found that by drinking ginger tea and eating more warm foods his post nasal drip decreased. A woman in her 20s found her acne improved with the elimination of cheese. A young graphic illustrator found that her mind was clearer, her creative juices flowed better and she was better able to meet deadlines when she didn't eat donuts. A man in his 50s with Fibromyalgia had decreased pain when he went without wheat bread and pastries. A middle-aged woman with Rheumatoid Arthritis found she had less joint pain and decreased heartburn when she drank less soda.

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PROACTIVE DIETARY MEASURES YOU CAN TAKE

- Eat food and drink fluids at room temperature or warmer.
- Incorporate bitter, pungent or aromatic foods and spices (see list below).
- Drink chicken broth as a snack.
- Appreciate the flavor of foods without complicated or heavy sauces.
- Eat small to moderate size meals. Avoid eating until you feel over full.
- Soak beans overnight in order to ease digestion.
- Drink ginger tea or eat a slice of raw ginger 15 minutes before meals.
- Exercise regularly.

FOODS TO INCORPORATE OR INCREASE

- ⤴ Lightly cooked vegetables.
- ⤴ Whole grains (particularly brown rice, barley, amaranth, rye, oats).
- ⤴ Legumes: easiest to digest include kidney beans, pinto beans, adzuki beans, and red lentils.
- ⤴ Lean meat, poultry & fish in small quantities. 3-4 oz. is about the size of a deck of cards.
- ⤴ Small amount of whole fruits, lemon.
- ⤴ Sesame, pumpkin and sunflower seeds.
- ⤴ Tea (Green, Oolong, Jasmine, Raspberry Leaf).
- ⤴ Chicken broth.
- ⤴ Bitter, pungent, aromatic spices: cloves, ginger, pepper, cardamom, cinnamon, mustard and mustard greens, nutmeg, thyme, turmeric, basil, garlic, onions, scallions, horseradish, turnips, radish, cayenne.

FOODS TO LIMIT OR AVOID

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| ⤵ Cold raw foods. Cold or iced drinks. | ⤵ Eggs. |
| ⤵ Refined sugar and sugar substitutes. | ⤵ Fruit juice. |
| ⤵ Dairy (particularly cheese, milk, and ice cream). | ⤵ Processed foods. |
| ⤵ Wheat (especially pastry, pasta, and breads). | ⤵ Coffee, alcohol. |
| ⤵ Nuts - 8-10 nuts is a serving. 1-2 servings daily okay. | ⤵ Deep fried foods or oil in large quantities. |
| ⤵ Tofu - less than 1c and preferably not every day. | ⤵ Peanuts and peanut butter. |
| ⤵ Fatty meats such as bacon or duck. | ⤵ Bananas, avocado. |

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While acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine can be important therapies in resolving *dampness* and phlegm, dietary modification plays a crucial role in symptom resolution and enduring change. In my work with patients, supporting them to explore how they nourish their body is often a critical piece in addressing their health concerns. One of the first things I encourage people to do is simply notice what they eat and how they feel. The correlations patients discover are usually so striking, a patient will return to my clinic with observations and insights galore into their own digestive function, energy level, sleeping patterns, and emotional states. And all of these discoveries have arisen from simply noticing.

Our memories can get a bit selective, so it can be helpful to keep a simple food log. Grab a notebook or download one of the myriad food tracking apps and throughout the day note the time, food choice, approximate quantity and then note changes in your energy, digestion (heartburn, gas, bloating), bowel movements, mental state/clarity, and change in any symptoms you're concerned about. Some symptoms respond very quickly while others may take weeks or months to change. When we scrutinize any activity (such as writing down what we eat), we often make changes unconsciously or choose to be selective in our recording. Maybe we're not so excited to write down having had that extra bag of chips, that second latte or third handful of snack food. The more honest you can be in the recording, the more likely you are to observe interesting links between what you eat and how you feel. As best as you can, rather than judging or criticizing yourself, try just being honest and curious.

What's wonderful is that the information that emerges from doing this exercise doesn't come from outside. It doesn't come from me as a health care provider, a magazine article or the web. This comes from a person's own body, their own experience. This information is right there for each one of us as long as we're willing to take the time to observe.

Experiment with some of the suggestions in this article and simply observe changes in your body. Some changes may be immediate, others may arise more gradually. You, alone, can determine the types of changes you're willing to make and on what timeline. It is my utmost desire to support people in exploring how they eat, so they will feel both healthier and more empowered in relationship to how they nourish themselves. If any questions have arisen as you've read this article, give me a call or send me an email. I welcome your questions and curiosity.

For additional information about optimizing digestion, please read the articles "Food as Medicine", and "Dietary recommendations for Blood Deficiency" available on the Resources page of my website amycdarling.com.

Amy C. Darling is an Acupuncturist, Herbalist and Health Educator. She serves as speaker and educational instructor in a variety of health-related topics, promoting the effects of dietary choices and meditation on health and well-being. Additional articles about nutrition and health are available on her website Resources page. She is available to educate academic, community and professional groups introducing food as a primary healing agent. She welcomes your inquiries.

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