

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 over the years and will continue to produce evolving drafts over the course of my life and practice.

Read through these ideas as if sipping a cup of tea or another beverage you enjoy. Take each in and see how it *tastes*, how it resonates 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 powder and 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: lots of vibrant vegetables and fruits, whole grains and healthy proteins. Strict deprivation is inflammatory as it increases obsessiveness related to food. Additionally, it predisposes us to binge out of rebellion. Eating well includes occasional indulgence in treats and food pleasures.
- **Regular meal times optimize digestive function.**
- **The digestive system thrives on warm, simple food.** Food which is cooked is easier for the body to digest than raw food, particularly when living in a cold, damp environment like the Pacific NW.
- **Cold and frozen foods distress the digestive system.**
- **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 quantities every 3-4 hours prevents sudden energy drops and reduces 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. Review the "Healthy Protein Sources" handout on my website's Resources tab for additional ideas about what contains protein.
- **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 article on "Dampness" on my website's Resources tab.
- **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, including 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 the article on "Blood Deficiency" on my website's Resources tab for additional information.
- **Keep Things Moving.** Daily bowel movements are imperative to maintain a healthy digestive system and vital health. Regular loose stools or diarrhea are indicative of weakness or sensitivity in the digestive system. Chronic constipation can very directly exacerbate a variety of health concerns: pain, teeth clenching, skin problems (acne, eczema, and psoriasis), insomnia, headaches and eye symptoms. Following the basic principles in this article will help things move smoothly. Individual consultation is often most appropriate to determine what is out of balance.

Amy C. Darling

Acupuncturist, Herbalist and Health Educator
amycdarling.com • amylac@amycdarling.com • 206.920.9929



- **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

- **Diets that promote fasting or severe calorie limits slow metabolism and eventually result in weight gain.**
- **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 you regularly eat while driving, walking or in front of your computer, consider pausing to enjoy and just eat.
- **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.
- **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 binging, to anorexia) afflict 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 nourishes our heart and mind, but doesn't 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

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.

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.

Amy C. Darling

Acupuncturist, Herbalist and Health Educator
amycdarling.com • amylac@amycdarling.com • 206.920.9929

