

Food as Medicine: Basic Principles of Healthful Eating

There's a LOT that influences how and what we eat. It's kinda complicated for...well a lot of people. People are self-consciousness about choices, impulses, things we do too much of, maybe others not quite enough. And, it can be really hard to know what to eat between latest food fads, our upbringing, and messages from our own bodies. What individual people need also varies so much, depending on one's *constitution*, activities, and climate. Some people struggle to access healthy, whole food depending on their neighborhood or their finances. Within whatever circumstances you find yourself, you do have choices. And here I'll offer a few principles that guide my choices and my encouragement for folk I work with in clinic.

The ideas here arise from a few different sources: my understanding of Chinese medical food therapy, my clinical and personal experiences. I have written several versions of this article over the years, it keeps evolving. 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. Do you have more questions? You may find answers to some of your questions in additional articles available on my website amycdarling.com under the nutrition section.

- **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. Ex. vegetables, whole grains, chicken, eggs, fruit,
- **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. When we deprive ourselves of things we love, that actually increases inflammation in the body from our anxiety about food!!! Eventually we binge in rebellion and don't feel so good at all. So take it easy. Eating well includes occasional indulgence in treats and food pleasures.
- **Regular meal times optimize digestive function.** The body likes regularity, not rigid, just predictable.
- **The digestive system thrives on warm, simple food.** Cooked food is easier for the body to digest than raw food. This is pure East Asian Medicine principle and applies particularly to living in a cold, damp environment like the Pacific NW. When we eat warm foods, we keep our digestive fire vibrant, this fire transforms the food we eat into energy so we can live and thrive! Having said that, if you live in the high desert in S. California or SE Asia in the peak of summer, your body may need light, room temperature foods.
- **Cold and frozen foods distress the digestive system.** Ice and cold foods diminish that digestive fire.
- **Eat some protein at every meal.** Protein takes longer to metabolize (3-4 hours. Carbs burn up in 1-2). Regular protein stabilizes blood sugar, insulin, and the hormones that impact our response to stress in our lives. Consuming small quantities every 3-4 hours prevents sudden energy drops, keeps our minds clear and focused, and reduces anxiety and irritability. Snacking on a single hard-boiled egg, chia seed pudding, yogurt or cottage cheese, a small amount of quinoa, or 8-12 nuts will provide more sustained energy than the muffin or donut. Review the "Healthy Protein Sources" for more ideas.
- **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. This kind of dampness in the body can cause or contribute to sinus congestion, respiratory problems, digestive weakness, lethargy, arthritic and other conditions. See article on "Dampness".
- **Our diet generates the blood which moistens and nourishes our body's tissues and organs.** Without proper blood nourishment, the body's tissues, including the nails and hair, become like a dry, hard sponge. This can contribute to 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.

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- **Keep Things Moving.** Daily bowel movements are important to maintain good digestive function and vital health. Regular loose stools or diarrhea indicate 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. Have a look at the handout to help things move smoothly.
- **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 when we eat, this impacts our 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.
- **Choosing organic foods, we decrease our exposure to chemicals which can harm the body and our environment in the short and long term.** More mainstream grocery stores now carry organic food, and prices continue to become more and more accessible. If financially prioritizing how to buy organic foods, consider this. Plants do not have a liver. Livers remove toxins from our bodies. In the absence of a liver, plants *dump* pesticides etc. they take in through soil, air, and water when growing in their skin and seeds. So, if you can't afford to purchase all of your food organic, try to purchase organic oils, nuts and seeds. When eating *non-organic* fruits and vegetables, peel or remove the skin.
- **If we pay attention, if we really listen, our body communicates** what really nourishes our body, mind and heart most. Sometimes when we make those more fun, indulgent choices, our bodies give us feedback through digestive upset, sinus congestion, energy changes, skin reactions, mental clarity and mood.

Having painted these broad brush-stroke principles, it feels important to repeat that food is a complicated issue for most of us. *Disordered eating patterns* (from chronic overeating to episodic bingeing, to anorexia) impact many adults and kids. We are continually bombarded with images of how we *should* look and what we *should* eat, some *not even really food*, or particularly nourishing food.

With patients, gently, patiently exploring how they nourish their bodies is often a critical piece of resolving the health concerns that brought them to me in the first place. It can be challenging to be honest with ourselves. One way to start is to notice any connections between what we eat and how we feel. Often the correlations are so striking, patients return with observations and insights galore into their own digestive function, energy level, sleeping patterns and mood. And this great teaching comes from an individual's own body! You've got the laboratory right there. Some people have written from Europe and Australia thanking me the transformative information in these articles. The content here, and some curiosity, may be enough for you. And individual consultation may be appropriate as there are so many different things that influence digestion. In my own health and body, I have learned so much about how food choices impact my health and vitality. I don't always listen 100% lol, but definitely 80%. So give a start to the conversation with your own body. I welcome comments and questions.

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