

The Tao of Healthy Eating A Summary

If we consider that 80% of the immune system is within the lining of the intestines, creating a capable digestive environment is imperative for optimal health. Western medicine identified this predominant part of our immune system in the tiny lymph-like nodes, called Peyer's Patches, in the walls of the small intestines. However, to understand the relationship of digestion and immune health, it would be prudent to look at a system of medicine that has documented medical dietary therapy for thousands of years.

Imagine the stomach as a pot and the spleen as the fire beneath the pot. The stomach's function is to create a warm mash out of the food we eat. The spleen then creates a distillation process to distribute the nutrients from this mash.

The yin-yang pair of the stomach and spleen are the center of the digestive system in Chinese medicine. The Chinese word for digestion means: to disperse, to transform and system. The spleen distills then drives the purest part of ingested food to the lungs and the purest liquid to the heart. The purified parts of food are called the "five flavors" which actually correspond to specific actions and become the basis for the creation of energy or "qi" within the lungs. The purified liquids help create blood within the heart. These purest parts of the food and liquid are known in Chinese medicine as "essence".

The less pure food and liquid are released by the stomach to the large and small intestine to be further broken down. The large intestine reabsorbs the purest part of the remaining food to nourish the kidneys. The small intestine transforms the remaining liquids which is then made into the body's thick liquids such as cerebrospinal and intra-articular fluids to nourish the kidneys.

Healthy Eating Guidelines

Chinese medical teaching suggests that most people, most of the time, should mostly eat cooked food. This sets up the stomach for ideal digestion. The first step in the digestive process consists of creating a 100 degree Fahrenheit "soup" in the stomach. Whatever facilitates creating this ideal temperature in the stomach benefits digestion and whatever impedes achieving that 100 degrees impairs digestion.

Cooking is predigestion. Warm, cooked food requires much less qi to be spent in the process of digestion. This is why soups, stews and hot cereals are so 'good for you.' These are the foods we feed infants and those recuperating from illness. The more a food is like 100 degree F soup, the easier it is for the body to digest and absorb the nutrients. Notably, this is why chewing food thoroughly is so important. The more one chews, the more the food is macerated and mixed with liquids (saliva), again like a soup or mash.

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There is a school of thought that eating raw food is healthier because enzymes and nutrients are destroyed in the process of cooking. However, if we take into account post-digestive absorption, we actually absorb more nutrients from cooked foods because the cooking process helps breakdown the cellulose walls that lock in nutrients. Additionally, the enzymes present in raw foods are there for the plant, not us. The human body makes its own enzymes to digest the foods we eat. Furthermore, our digestive process tends to destroy any enzymes already present in our food.

Recommendations:

Everything in moderation!

Basic Diet: lightly cooked fresh vegetables, rice/grains, some beans/legumes, fruit

Food Preparation: steam, saute, braise, roast
(with boiling most of the nutrients are dumped out with the water)

Warming Spices: pepper, cinnamon, nutmeg, cloves, ginger, cardamom, mace

Meats: “Most people do fine on two ounces of meat 3-4 times per week.”
Consider meat more as a condiment, for flavor, as is typical in traditional Mediterranean, Mid-eastern, Indian, Chinese, Thai and Japanese dishes.

Drinks: When we have cold drinks with our meals, it arrests digestion in the stomach and puts out the fire of the spleen. The food, unable to be properly digested, causes the stomach to overheat as it tries to cook cold material and the fire of the spleen doused out by the liquid. If anything, a small cup of warm liquid with meals suffices, however if food is being chewed properly, it is not necessary to have a drink to ‘wash it down’. Lastly, in Chinese medicine, coffee and alcohol are medicinals and best taken for occasional enjoyment.

The subtleties of Chinese medical theory are a far stretch for western minds relative to diets. What I have discovered is that each form of food, each process through the body, has deep and lasting effects. And that the qi, from good food well digested, becomes essence. That the essence’s ultimate purpose is to be transformed into the light of consciousness, empowering us to make choices in our diet that support a healthy immune system.

Mangiare mangia tutte bene!