

If you take a walk outside after a heavy rain, happens often in the PNWt, 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, 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). Unfortunately, this kind of *dampness* (from an East Asian Medical view) 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 and living environment. A person's *constitution* is a combination of heredity, the health of one's 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*, where we're more vulnerable. Having an honest sense of one's own *constitution*, bodily strengths and weaknesses, is a good first step to thriving health.

In the Northwest, we live in a climate that's frequently wet and cold. Just living here, our bodies are exposed to dampness all the time. Daily or regular time spent outdoors in the rain (for example: construction or landscaping work, running or bicycle commuting, being houseless) further contributes to this exposure. To understand how what we eat influences *damp* accumulation, let's consider digestion in broad terms for a moment, a metaphor I repeat in some of other "Food as Medicine" articles.

All food breaks down to fuel the basic functions of the *bodymind*. 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 like a big log. These include beans and legumes, whole grains to some extent, tofu and tempeh, nuts and seeds, and all animal products. 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. 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 waterlogged branch hauled out of the Olympic rain forest at the end of a long Northwest winter.

Foods that burn like the waterlogged branch are considered *damp* in nature. Regularly eating *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 *damp foods* is clearly outlined toward the end the article. There are also notes about how to prepare foods to moderate their *damp* quality.

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

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- Sinus congestion and chronic infections.
- Allergies.
- Respiratory problems.
- Digestive problems.
- Skin conditions.
- Lethargy, stiffness 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 (pink to red) 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 experience of health and life, 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 police officer in his late 20s, found that when he eliminated ice water at lunch, he didn't have to urgently look for a bathroom in the afternoon.
- 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.
- A young woman in college found that when she ate protein, rather than just carbs, her migraines stopped.

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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 or other bone 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.
- ↑ Fermented Vegetables (kimchi, kraut)
- ↑ Sesame, pumpkin and sunflower seeds.
- ↑ Tea (Green, Oolong, Jasmine, Raspberry Leaf).
- ↑ Chicken or bone 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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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ↘ Cold raw foods. Cold or iced drinks. ↘ Refined sugar and sugar substitutes. ↘ Dairy (particularly cheese, milk, and ice cream). ↘ Wheat (especially pastry, pasta, and breads). ↘ Nuts - 8-10 nuts is a serving. 1-2 servings daily okay. ↘ Tofu - less than 1c and preferably not every day. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ↘ Fatty meats such as bacon or duck. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ↘ Eggs. ↘ Fruit juice. ↘ Processed foods. ↘ Coffee, alcohol. ↘ Deep fried foods or oil in large quantities. ↘ Peanuts and peanut butter. ↘ Bananas, avocado. |
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You may be thinking, what a BUMMER! So many great foods, so much *dampness*! **I get it.** I have a pretty *damp constitution* and have spent about 3/4s of my life in the PNW. While acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine can be important therapies in resolving *dampness* and phlegm, changing up the foods we already eat plays a crucial role in lasting change. One of the first things I encourage people to do is simply notice what they eat and how they feel. Just start noticing. The correlations patients discover are usually so striking, someone returns to clinic with observations and insights galore into their own digestive health, energy level, mood and sleeping patterns. And all of these discoveries come 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 many 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 look critically at any activity (say writing down what we eat), sometimes it's hard to be honest. Or we make changes unconsciously or are selective in our recording. There's lots of shaming in this country about food and eating and body. This practice is just for you! Remember, this is only for your learning and health. And, it can be so valuable to have a compassionate and understanding accountability partner in the process. 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 comes 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 your own body, your own experience. This information is right there for each one of us as long as we're willing to take the time to observe.

You, alone, can determine the types of changes you're willing to make and on what timeline. It's a passionate 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 popped up as you read this article, give me a call or send me an email. I welcome your questions and curiosity.

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