

What is *Blood Deficiency* and Why is it Important?

Thriving health depends on what and how we eat. Think about it for a minute. Say you eat pancakes for breakfast. YUM! But an hour or two later you're hungry again, maybe even a little nauseous. Or think how you feel a couple hours after popcorn for lunch versus chicken soup, hefty salad with protein, or stir fry. Ever notice how in summer fruit season, *things* are a little...looser? Move a little more...quickly? ***Tuning in*** is a huge first step toward digestive health. ***Tuning in*** means learning to listen to one's own body.

I talk about some big principles supporting digestive health in "Food as Medicine." In this article, I'll talk about ***blood deficiency***, something that impacts people I see in clinic every day. Below, I'll outline this East Asian medical concept in clear and lay person's language so you can see how it might apply to you (or someone important to you). I'll start with a basic metaphor I often use in describing how different foods impact the digestive system.

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 include the pancakes, refined sugars, pasta and bread, popcorn, most fruit and vegetables. They all break down into pretty simple sugars. Other foods are like slow burning *briquettes* or a big log; they take a little longer to get started (digested), but they keep *cooking* for hours. These include beans and pulses, whole grains, tofu and tempeh, nuts and seeds, and all animal products including dairy.

In East Asian medicine, we also pay attention to how different foods ***nourish*** the blood. Our blood is like an irrigation system for the body. The flow and the nutrients in the irrigation system determine the health of our skin, eyes, nails, hair, muscles, tendons, ligaments, and organs. 'Well irrigated' blood expresses itself in a brightness in the eyes, hair that is full and shiny, strong smooth nails, skin that is not too dry or flakey. What we can see on the outside (hair, nails, skin), is also happening to our organs and tissues on the inside. When *well-irrigated*, our muscles and organs remain moist, supple and vital. If our bodies are not *well-irrigated* with healthy, nutrient rich, ***blood nourishing*** foods, the opposite of those characteristics listed above starts to show up in our tissues, outside and inside of the body.

Animal protein is one of the easiest ways to ***nourish*** the blood. If you've limited eating animal protein for any period of your life, for financial, ethical, spiritual reasons, or due to food insecurity, you may well have experienced some of the symptoms noted above because of ***blood deficiency***. Dedicated vegetarianism, insufficient protein consumption, or eating mostly cold or raw foods can also weaken the digestive system, compromising the ability to absorb necessary nutrients from the food we eat. Although some patients who present as ***blood deficient*** can be anemic, ***blood deficiency*** is not necessarily synonymous with anemia.

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Blood deficiency can commonly result in:

- Musculo-skeletal injuries that fail to heal. This condition is common among young, very athletic women who have a history of being/are currently vegetarian, have disordered eating, or eat limited protein.
- Menstrual irregularities or absence of menstrual period.
- Infertility.
- Insomnia.
- Poor memory.
- Anxiety, depression and/or fatigue.
- Numbness in the extremities.
- Leg cramps, restless leg syndrome.
- Dry skin.
- Blurred vision or other vision problems.

Additionally, *blood deficiency* can, but doesn't always generate *internal wind*. The East Asian medical concept of *internal wind* can be observed in symptoms such as itchy skin, eye twitching, dizziness, and leg cramps; all symptoms that move or stir within one's body like the wind. The amazing thing is that our bodies are just waiting for the nourishment, like the soil ready for rain.

I have seen patients successfully resolve symptoms of *blood deficiency with internal wind* including severe eye twitches, unrelenting whole body itching after working out, psoriasis, amenorrhea (periods stopping), severe menstrual cramping, constipation, insomnia, restless leg syndrome and others. Depending on the severity of the symptoms and the root cause, food may or may not be enough to resolve these symptoms. Sometimes iron supplementation (even by IV) is also needed. Regardless, nourishing the blood through a healthy diet is a good starting point to discern what's happening and pivot toward thriving health.

Eating a variety of whole foods will nourish the blood. The quantity of foods necessary to rebuild the blood will vary depending on 1) the severity of symptoms, 2) the strength of an individual's digestive system, 3) their dedication to consistently nourishing their blood through food. Some *blood nourishing* foods are more difficult to digest and so must be consumed in moderation while a person's digestive system strengthens. Sometimes, consuming digestive enzymes or bitters can also be helpful. When making changes in how we eat, while it's important to consider the most potent forms of *blood nourishment*. It's also critical to consider the whole context of one's life and make choices that are sustainable one's palate, spirit and wallet.

BLOOD NOURISHING FOODS

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Molasses • Chicken • Bone stock and soup • Eggs • Fresh ginger • Black sesame seeds • Leafy green (kale, chard, spinach, collards) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beets • Cooked whole grains • Goji berries • Rice syrup, barley malt and raw sugar cane • Vegemite and marmite • Fermented Soy products (tempeh, miso) |
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- All red meat (lamb, buffalo, pork, particularly bone, marrow and liver)
 - Legumes in general; especially chick peas, black, kidney, adzuki and fava beans
 - Mackerel, tuna, anchovy, oysters, mussels, shrimp, prawns, clams, seaweeds
 - Winter squash or pumpkin, sweet potatoes, carrots, corn, parsnips, yams, peas, onions, leeks, garlic, turnip, mushrooms (including oyster and shitake)
 - Stewed fruits, dates, figs, longan berries, grapes, cherries

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Consider if these foods have been a regular part of your diet in the past, or how often you eat them at this time.

My own personal experiences with healing through food fuels my passion about this part of thriving health. I stopped eating meat when I was 19 for ethical and sustainability reasons. Reserving fish as a celebration food, I was vegetarian for 14 years. Through my personal and clinical experience, I have determined that it is very difficult, at least living in the NW, for the body to get what it needs from a strict vegetarian diet. In Arizona or Southeast Asia, maybe not a problem. But it's very different in the damp-cold of the PNW. I returned to eating meat. It was difficult for me to come to this conclusion, but my own compromised health demanded it. While my experience informs my views about optimal health and *blood nourishment*, I meet people where they are in their own life choices.

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 the following week with observations and insights galore into their own digestive function, energy level, sleeping patterns and mood. What's wonderful is that this information doesn't come from the 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 experiences. This *information* is right there for each one of us. However, we're often so caught up in our own physical discomfort or in our lives driven by capitalism, that we fail to recognize the dots our bodies are begging us to connect.

Experiment with some of the suggestions in this article. Simply observe changes in your body. Some changes may be immediate, other may come more gradually. You, alone, can determine the types of changes you're willing to make and on what timeline. I'm passionate about supporting people to notice how they eat, so they will feel both healthier and more empowered in relationship to nourishing themselves. If any questions have come up as you've read this article, please contact me! I welcome your questions and curiosity.

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