

## Food as Medicine: Basic Principles of Vitality through Food & Eating

**Food and eating is complicated for a lot of people.** Attending to how we nourish ourselves has an amazing impact on our health and life. The foods that suit an individual body are different depending on one's *constitution*, daily activities, history with food insecurity and trauma, and the current environment in which we live. And, there are some fundamental principles that support healthy digestion and vitality. Ultimately, we all have to make choices that work for our lives, that balance resources, effort, capacity and so many other factors. I've pulled together important ideas from Chinese medical food therapy, my clinical and personal experience and distilled them here.

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 does it resonate as true for you? Does it inspire more questions? I'm hopeful this will support a healthy conversation between you and your body about how you nourish yourself.

- **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. While 'anti-inflammatory' foods are great, strict deprivation is inflammatory as it increases obsessiveness related to food. Plus, it makes us more likely 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.** This includes beverages, best room temp or warmer.
- **Eat some protein at every meal.** Carbs are like kindling, they give us fast, immediate fuel. Protein is like slow burning briquettes. It takes longer to burn up/metabolize. So, protein stabilizes blood sugar, insulin, and the hormones which influence our response to stress. Eating small amounts of protein every 3-4 hours prevents sudden energy drops, strengthens focus, reduces anxiety and irritability. Snacking on a few nuts, a single hardboiled egg, a lil quinoa, turkey, yogurt or cottage cheese, all offer more sustained energy than the quick muffin or popcorn. 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 build up because of one's 'constitution', diet, or living environment. Dampness 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, skin 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.** Pooping is so important! It's critical to a healthy digestive system and vital health. Regular loose stools or diarrhea can indicate weakness or sensitivity in the digestive system. Chronic constipation can 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 about how to 'Keep things Moving' (on website's Resources page) will do just that. Individual consultation is often most appropriate to determine what's out of balance.

**Zoe aka Amy Darling**

Acupuncturist, Herbalist and Health Counselor

healing@zoeadarling.com • zoeadarling.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, to push out. Imbalances already present in the body are aggravated by these foods. As much of a bummer as it is, the fā foods are:  
Shellfish 🌀 Tropical fruit 🌀 Chocolate 🌀 Coffee 🌀 Alcohol
- **Fasting or severe calorie limits slow metabolism and eventually result in weight gain.** Our bodies were designed to survive scarcity. I continue to be very suspect of intermittent fasting based on the impact I've witnessed on mental health and menstrual cycles for a lot of people. I'm happy to talk more.
- **How we feel when we eat impacts how we digest our food.** If rushed, distracted, anxious or angry while eating, this impacts our ability to really absorb nourishment. If you regularly eat while driving, walking or in front of your computer, consider pausing to just eat.
- **By choosing organic foods, we decrease our exposure to chemicals which can harm the body and our environment in the short and long term. Pesticides etc are also potentially harmful to those who harvest, transport, and handle them.** If financially prioritizing which foods to purchase organically, consider this. Plants don't have a liver. Our livers help remove toxins from the body. Plants 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 eating *non-organic* fruits and vegetables, remove the skin or peel. Free range, organically grown meats are most healthy.
- **If we pay attention, our bodies communicate pretty clearly.** If we really tune in and pay attention, we can observe the impact of different foods and behaviors around eating through digestive and energy changes, mental clarity and mood. If we listen, our bodies can help us discern the most nourishing fuel for our body, mind and heart.

Like I said at the beginning, food is complicated for most people in some way. We are continually bombarded with images of how we *should* look, what we *should* eat, how we *should* look, and we are surrounded by things to eat which are *not really food*, or at least not particularly nourishing food.

In my clinical work, exploring with people how they nourish their body is often a critical piece of addressing health concerns. It's sometimes hard to be honest with ourselves about what we're actually eating 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, someone returns to a follow up session with observations and insights galore into their own digestive function, energy level, body pain, sleeping patterns and mood. The wisdom comes from simply *tuning in!*

I love supporting people to examine their relationship with food so they can feel both healthier and more empowered in relationship to how they nourish themselves. If you have questions, I welcome contact from you. Consider this article an invitation into a healthful dialogue with yourself and your body.

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