

Iffley Acupuncture Clinic



Website Content

Achieving Wellbeing 2

Hot and Cold and further insights into the spleen

Introduction/Abstract:

This essay will introduce you to the way in which food can influence the functioning of Stomach and Spleen and in turn your general health. If you have not yet read “Achieving wellbeing 1”, “Food for thought”, then I recommend that you do so; the information within will provide foundations for enabling a greater appreciation of the content of this essay. Whilst the former is designed to provide you with insights into how to achieve a healthy eating lifestyle, this essay will develop your understanding still further, by providing an alternative model for understanding how food influences our health and wellbeing. We will be exploring the way in which the energetics of food itself can either adversely or alternatively positively influence the health of our digestive systems and whole body.

The right food

Whilst healthy eating patterns are tantamount to obtaining and maintaining healthy digestion, it should be clearly emphasised that the actual food we consume is an integral part of achieving wellbeing. Although each individual will exhibit their own biological predisposition and therefore a tendency to a given condition or pattern, we are able to offer advice and information that can be evaluated and utilised by everyone. Whilst advice is given according to the individual needs of a patient at the clinic, certain patterns of disharmony occur more frequently. Indeed, most of us will encounter these patterns at some stage in our lives. The guidelines below then, are more focussed on the latter and incorporate knowledge that can be explored by everyone and used to adjust their food, it's preparation and obtain more beneficial intake.

Hot or Cold

According to TCM foods are categorised according to their energetic qualities, and by this I mean according to the energetic impact that each food exerts on the human body. TCM is not so concerned with the analysis of food according to their relative amounts of minerals, vitamins, protein, carbohydrate and fat, rather, individual foods are accredited with a number of given energetic attributes. One of which categorises them according to whether they are Hot, Warm, Neutral, Cool or Cold, and as such,

an extension of the categories and thinking behind Chinese herbal medicine. Each of these qualities will exert a specific influence on the digestive system or Spleen and in turn on the general constitution. Put simply, foods can either warm us up or, cool us down; enhance function or undermine it. Warming foods have a tendency to cause Qi to move upwards and outwards from the centre, thereby 'warming us from within. Cooling foods by contrast, cause the Qi to contract or descend. Warm foods tend to enhance function, whilst cooling foods can undermine or diminish it.

In this discussion we will be exploring the impact of food by way of relative temperature and more specifically how the preparation of food for our consumption directly influences it's energetic impact on our digestive system and bodies. Whilst this system of categorisation is not solely concerned with the actual physical temperature of the food we eat, its relative warmth does nevertheless, have a very profound bearing. Similarly the method of preparation, whether a food is cooked or raw, even how it is cooked, will determine the energetic outcome within our bodies. These qualities form the basis of this essay.

Nevertheless, a given or particular food will also exert a specified energy or temperature within us and will therefore, exert a different energetic impact than another. The specific energies of different food types will subsequently be expanded upon and will form the basis of the third part of this discussion, "Achieving wellbeing, part 3".

According to TCM, the Spleen and Stomach are, and prefer a warm condition to carry out their functions of Transformation and Transportation (T&T) properly. If we eat foods that have a cold or cooling nature, then we impose a cold energy onto the Stomach and Spleen. Their function of T&T can in turn be adversely affected, with a number of symptoms ensuing. Whilst a combination of Warming and Cooling foods within a given meal can serve to balance each other, a person with a weak Spleen is likely to suffer if cold foods predominate over neutral, warm or hot ones.

It should be made clear nevertheless, that a given 'Pattern of Disharmony' does not always arise out of inappropriate food and eating patterns, they can also be the

consequence of adverse climatic conditions and environment, chronic or protracted illness and indeed, lifestyle. The pattern of Spleen Qi Deficiency for example, can arise from living in damp conditions; a damp house, living and working near water. It is in fact an extremely common occurrence in Oxford and the Thames Valley and the product therefore of living in low lying, effectively marsh-like conditions. I have on many occasions noted how the presentation of my patient's tongues have improved on their return from dryer more warmer climes, and seemingly worsening after they have been back in Oxford for a period of time.

The pattern is also found more commonly in people who spend long periods studying, sitting and using their minds more than their bodies at work. Those of us who have a tendency to worry and over think or cogitate are also more inclined to this pattern.

What I would like the reader to avoid then, is an impression that a Pattern will always arise because of only one factor. For example, eating raw food. Whilst this can and does happen, it is more likely to occur through a number of corollary conditions; eating raw food whilst living in damp conditions and spending excessive amounts of time worrying about one's success in forthcoming college exams is a more likely scenario.

However, a Pattern of Disharmony can most significantly be addressed by adjusting both the food that we eat and the manner in which we eat it. Regardless of how we have arrived at our given condition, we can take very positive steps to deal with it by addressing factors that can, with good intention, be significantly influenced. If we have Spleen Qi deficiency, arising from the interaction of a weakened constitution with a damp environment, then it would be unwise to embark upon a raw food diet in the hope of achieving health. We would only serve to worsen our condition. Conversely, to ensure that we eat warming and nourishing foods regularly and not late at night, will secure a route for amelioration or resolution of the Pattern and it's symptoms.

I list below some of the patterns that are associated with disruption to the function of the digestive system to enable the reader to ascertain whether they are relevant to

their own experience. In doing so they will subsequently be able devise strategies for readdressing the imbalances that they may be encountering.

Readers are advised that these “Patterns of Disharmony do not correlate directly with disease categories in western medicine, although they may according to TCM give rise to them. They will vary in intensity from one person to another and also within an individual. Diet alone will not always secure their resolution, but appropriate adjustment will undoubtedly influence them significantly.

Spleen Qi deficiency.

Spleen Qi deficiency is one of many “Patterns of Disharmony’, and one that is commonly encountered, albeit with others. It manifests in people with:-

- tiredness and lassitude
- poor appetite
- mild bloating or abdominal distension after eating
- tiredness after eating
- a inclination to rest and lie down
- weakness in the arms and legs and
- loose bowel movements, sometimes with undigested food in the stool

Readers are advised that they need not exhibit all symptoms and may well encounter only some of them. People with Spleen Qi deficiency may have a tendency to put on weight and can become obese although it should also be noted that the pattern may also lead to weight loss. The overall pattern reflects a loss of function in the digestive system due to deficiency of Qi within and in turn results deficiency of Qi within the body as whole. The symptoms described above reflect one ‘pattern’ in isolation, in reality however individuals are likely to experience more than one. Thus a person may note that they do experience some of the symptoms as described above, but also a range of others.

Spleen Yang deficiency.

Includes all of the above symptoms of Spleen Qi deficiency, but also includes the following:-

- feelings of coldness and cold limbs
- a pale complexion
- perhaps a desire to lie down, withdraw and curl up
- a greater tendency to put on weight and become obese
- possibly oedema – an excessive fluid build up in the body or limbs

Spleen Qi Deficiency and Dampness.

This loss of function results in the impairment of the Spleen to Transform and Transport food and **fluid**. A subsequent build up of fluid within causes the formation of 'Internal Dampness'. The symptoms of Internal dampness deriving from Spleen Qi deficiency are:-

- A feeling of fullness and heaviness in the epigastrium (beneath the ribs and above the umbilicus) and in the abdomen
- Nausea and less frequently vomiting
- A sticky taste in the mouth and a sticky tongue coating
- Loose bowel movements and possibly mucous in the stools
- A possible feeling of tiredness and heaviness in the body and maybe muscle aches and weakness. (Dampness can occur in areas other than the digestive system but their presentation will be aggravated or even formed by the Dampness arising from Spleen disharmony).



In my practice this last pattern is more frequently diagnosed than the former and I believe this to be the result of our immediate environment. As previously discussed, Oxford sits in the Thames Valley basin, where water is abundant, persistent and slow to drain. Residents of this area may well have noted the

considerable early morning mists that arise over the rivers, and in the marshes and meadows that surround them, even in the summer months. The relative slow movement of air is both exacerbated by these conditions and the product of it. This in turn, results in comparative poor quality and a preponderance of pollution. This seeming persistence or stubbornness means that we are as a community perhaps more subject to influence of our damp environment.

Damp Heat:

Dampness within the body frequently transforms into what we call 'damp heat' which in turn is the product of a range of corollary conditions, including the excessive consumption of sweet, spicy and fatty foods, alcohol, emotional stresses and strains and other internal imbalances. Damp Heat can also be the product of external invasion and the product then, of environmental influence. I would argue that Damp Heat is in fact an even more common occurrence, certainly than the simple patterns described above, and one that requires careful consideration and adjustment in eating style. Damp Heat shares common characteristics as Dampness in general and includes symptoms such as, a feeling of heaviness in the body and head, poor appetite, (sometimes an excessive one), a sticky taste, a feeling of fullness in the chest and or epigastrium, urinary difficulty, and excessive vaginal discharge. It usually is accompanied by feelings of heat, and therefore the tongue body will be red and it's coating will be sticky and yellow; a person with damp heat will have a redder complexion rather than a pale one and may exhibit more oily and greasy skin. Symptoms can manifest throughout the body including the Internal Organs or Zang Fu, in the meridians and also the skin. When it affects the internal organs, for example the vagina, there may be excessive, yellow and probably malodorous secretions. If in the bowel, the stools will not only be loose, they will also be foul smelling and possibly cause burning and itching. If there is Damp Heat in the skin, then this can give rise to skin conditions, (including eczema). These conditions are characterised by red skin with probable itching and the presence of papules (solid bumps/spots sometimes red) and more frequently in diseases like eczema, vesicles (fluid filled bumps or spots).

The reader would be forgiven at this juncture for suspecting that the introduction of cooling foods would serve to ameliorate that the presence of Damp Heat, but it should be remembered that this heat can arise from or be aggravated by, both Spleen Qi Deficiency and the subsequent formation of Damp. The ingestion of raw, cold food may serve to exacerbate the problem.

Spleen Qi deficiency and Blood Deficiency:

I have already stated that the primary function of the Spleen is the responsibility of Transformation and Transportation (T&T) of food and fluid. The discussion so far has focussed a little more on the generation of dampness from the undermining of this process. However one of the more significant outcomes of this function is the formation of blood (Xue). It follows then, that when T&T is impaired, that our capacity to absorb and assimilate is also undermined and this in turn means that people suffering from Spleen Deficiency will frequently exhibit what is termed a Blood Deficiency. We should be clear at this juncture that we are not specifically talking about anaemia, although this disease can be present within the pattern. Blood, according to TCM, has the job of nourishing, bathing, soothing and replenishing the organs and tissues and in turn, providing the physical foundation for normal and healthy function. This is of special importance to women, who by way of menstruation, are more likely to be Blood deficient. It is not uncommon for this situation to be aggravated by the fact that women, in spite of the fact that they are seemingly more likely to seek a healthy diet, are ill advised and misinformed.

Thus we are beginning to see how a seemingly simple pattern can over time give to the formation of others, which in turn undermine our wellbeing and health. It is therefore essential that we consider how to secure healthy digestive function and thereby promote overall health.

External Dampness

As had already been stated, Spleen deficiency with Dampness can be aggravated by the pernicious influence of External Dampness. Living in damp areas, inhabiting a

damp house or wearing damp clothes after exercise or swimming, can undermine Spleen function and give rise to Dampness entering the body. It is worth noting that women can be much more susceptible to the adverse influence of damp during their periods.

The symptoms of External Dampness include:-

- acute urinary difficulty including cystitis
- acute vomiting
- acute diarrhoea
- acute menstrual pain and vaginal discharge
- aching and swollen joints (e.g. in arthritic conditions)
- a feeling of heaviness in the limbs and aching muscles

The reason why I include this last category here within, is because the frequency of Damp conditions / symptoms is commonplace in my clinic and in which they serve to cause and exacerbate conditions, or complicate them. My own clinical experience strongly confirms the Chinese theory and frequently demonstrates how inhabiting a profoundly damp area such as Oxford and the Thames valley will exert negative influence on our wellbeing. Thus if we can recognise the conditions that worsen the experience of dampness within our bodies, such inappropriate eating, then adjust appropriately and limit it's influence.



How we address these patterns of disharmony

In simple terms, by giving up some foods and drinks introducing others. (and of course taking into consideration the healthy eating patterns described in 'Achieving Wellbeing part1')

Western exponents of healthy eating frequently promote the need for consumption of salad and raw foods; arguing that nutrient content of these foods are considerably

higher than in their cooked equivalents. This is undoubtedly true, but whether these nutrients are accessible is in fact quite questionable. A wall of cellulose surrounds plant cells, which give them structural strength but sadly this frequently renders them indigestible. Unlike members of the animal kingdom, humans do not possess the same capacity to masticate, nor produce sufficient enzymes to enable adequate digestion. According to Chinese medicine, raw foods in general are by nature, cooling or cold. This means that if the environment into which they are being ingested is deficient, (Spleen Qi deficiency), they will in fact hinder digestion rather than improve it. Thus even though raw foods are seemingly superior by way of quantity of nutrients, their value is undermined by their cold nature. The Chinese solution to this problem, is to simply stir fry their ingredients in a wok. This serves to seal in the precious nutrients, whilst at the same time breaking down the cell wall of the vegetables within. The addition of small amounts of ginger will add a warm energy to them and in turn, to the spleen; thereby enhancing function and the capacity to absorb more effectively.

Earlier in this discussion I stated that the actual physical temperature of food and drink has direct impact on the functioning of the Spleen and to some extent this has been reinforced in the discussion on raw food. However the consumption of cold food and drink serves equally to undermine our wellbeing. Cold drinks taken from the fridge, and beverages served in restaurants, pubs and cafés are frequently served chilled and made more so with the addition of ice. They most definitely cool us down when we are hot, but they do so with such ferocity that they instil excessive coldness inside our bodies, that in turn undermines healthy Spleen function with vengeance. The cold energy of these drinks are so extreme that they undermine the functioning of other bodily systems relatively quickly and in turn cause or aggravate dysfunction and pain within a number of areas of the body. I'm sure many a reader will recall at least one episode of shearing tooth pain after biting into an ice cream or lolly. It is not too hard then to imagine how this phenomenon will, over due course, exert the same within the body as a whole. Indeed cold, chilled and frozen foods or drinks can and do, cause or aggravate pain. According to TCM, they can (in addition to externally generated cold) be responsible for menstrual pain; seemingly resolved by its opposite when women place a hot water bottle on their tummies during acute episodes of menstrual cramping. Whilst those of us with a profoundly more hot constitution may tolerate

these conditions better than those with a cold one, the effect of long term consumption of chilled food and drink will undoubtedly undermine function. In fact the reason we actually cool food in the fridge is to slow down the breakdown and degradation of food function; this is achieved in part by slowing the normal growth of micro-organisms.

Whilst the cold physical temperature of food and drink serve to undermine Spleen function, they also in turn exacerbate the formation of Dampness, either in the Spleen itself or otherwise. In addition foods that are unnecessarily refined, and more specifically carbohydrates, appear also to generate dampness within. Sweet foods and sugar definitely increase the formation of damp and mucous and generally should be avoided; most definitely in those people with Spleen deficiency and Damp conditions. Similarly our seeming national preoccupation with consumption of dairy produce serves to predispose us to ill health rather than promote it. I cannot stress enough the need to avoid dairy if you suspect you are subject to any of the above patterns. Concerns about deficiencies of calcium and Vitamin D are unfounded; whilst relevant at the turn of last century when it offered a seemingly cheap option for allaying the formation of rickets within the poverty stricken working class, there is now no reason to promote it. Research has shown that both can be obtained in equally if not better amounts from other foods. Some practitioners of TCM in the west are now suggesting that our equally over consumption of wheat based products also create Dampness and I am increasingly finding myself sharing this position, as evidence is accruing and I see significant improvements in the health of my patients who have eliminated it from their diet. On a positive note though if we increase our consumption of Rye, Corn, aduki beans, celery, pumpkin seeds, spring onions, alfalfa, and turnips etc, we can actually resolve and eliminate dampness from our bodies.

What does all this mean? Or... In Summary

In summary then, raw or cold food and food or drink that has been chilled or frozen undermine healthy functioning of our Spleen and in turn overall bodily function. Those with a robust and hotter constitution may well be able to tolerate them more than those with a weak or cold one, but there are no real advantages. It is wiser to avoid

them and better to consider balancing diet with other means; for example considering the energetic qualities of foods. This will be the subject of part three of this discussion.

Sweet and refined carbohydrates, wheat and dairy foods cause and or exacerbate dampness and generally should be avoided; considered only on occasions and most definitely form the foundation of our diet. We can address Damp conditions by eating foods that resolve or drain it.

Thus what should become apparent from this seemingly long-winded discussion, is that the function of the Spleen and Stomach can become impaired by inappropriate lifestyle and eating habits, the wrong food, (namely energetically cold and Damp producing foods) and, habitat. If we regulate our eating habits, eat the right foods and take care to minimise our exposure to climatic excesses, then we will create the conditions for a healthy digestive system and in turn a healthier body.

Let food be your medicine and medicine be your food.

So before we consider the categorisation of food more fully, I recommend that the reader consider the information so far and begin to implement some of the recommendations. These foundations will serve you well and are likely to bring significant changes, that later can be supplemented with an exploration into the specific energies of given food types. This subject will form the major part of Achieving wellbeing Part 3.

