



A Science of Medicine
The Art of Care

Dietotherapy: “*Let food be your medicine*”

Part 1: Background and theory

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The subject of dietotherapy, especially from the Tibb perspective, is not easily condensed into one article. It will therefore be described over two – the first one will deal with the basic principles of dietotherapy, and the second will cover its actual practice.

Background

Food occupies a central place in our daily life. It supplies all essential nutrients necessary for our existence, and is the source of our physical and mental energy. Since the earliest times, people have been aware that a poor or unbalanced intake of food and drink can lead to the onset, progress or persistence of many common diseases. This

“Leave your drugs in the chemist’s pot if you can heal the patient with food.”
[Hippocrates, 460 to 377 B.C.E]

was noted by Hippocrates, Galen and Ibn Sina, the original pioneers of Tibb. In fact, most chronic disorders of our time result in part from malnutrition in one form or another. Diabetes, obesity, heart disease, inflammatory diseases, some skin disorders and cancer can trace

their origin back to poor or unwise consumption of food – too much salt or fat; too little fibre; not enough fruit and vegetables; bad eating habits, etc. Many of the early observations have since been unequivocally confirmed by studies carried out by present-day medical research. For example, cancer is, in many if not most cases, linked to the type of food consumed by the person afflicted: specifically the nature of the fat and sugar consumed regularly, and in abnormally large amounts.

“The throat destroys more than the sword does.” [Galen, 130 to 220 C.E.]

However, the other side of the coin, the use of diet to improve health, promote recovery from disease, and prevent disorders from developing is enjoying a revival of interest. Long accepted as one of the pillars of Lifestyle Factors in Tibb, this therapeutic approach is known as *dietotherapy*. Evidence is mounting that changes to a person’s diet is capable of reversing the progression of many chronic diseases, and this has led to renewed interest in the technique. Again, Hippocrates thought of it first: “*Let your food be your medicine, and medicine be your food.*” Instead of being an afterthought when treating a particular disorder, changes and improvement of diet is now being considered for a place at the forefront of therapy.

What is dietotherapy?

What is the difference between dietetics and dietotherapy?

Dietetics is the scientific study of nutrition, or the food and drink we consume – *our diet* – on a regular daily basis. The reverse, the study of how food, or particular components of it, can contribute to the long-term treatment of chronic ailments, is called *dietotherapy*.

In practice, dietotherapy involves encouraging a person with a chronic disorder, brought on by a faulty or imprudent personal lifestyle, to consciously adopt reasonable and realistic changes to his or her diet, in order to reverse the progress of the disorder. In Tibb, the aim of such dietary changes is to restore equilibrium or harmony to the qualities involved in the person's temperament.

Dietotherapy is a major therapeutic option, along with cupping, herbal medication (or *phytotherapy*) and massage. As with all forms of treatment in Tibb, it respects Physis, the body's innate capacity for self-healing: "*the doctor within us*

Physis is the body's intrinsic ability to heal itself from within, without outside help. It is our 'inner doctor'.

all". It is an approach to health maintenance and disease alleviation which is completely safe, and, if carried out properly, free from any adverse consequences. By supporting and enhancing Physis, it restores the person's intrinsic harmony between the qualities. In most cases, the actual

type of food or its nutritive value is not important; it is its ability to reverse the disordered qualities that have lead insidiously to the chronic ailment in the first place. The consumption of specific foods is encouraged, and the omission of deleterious foods discouraged.

Tibb and the nature of food

Food, whether meat, vegetables, fruit, grains, etc., is made up of five major components: proteins, carbohydrates, fats, minerals and water. Tibb has allocated different qualities to each of these components:

- **Proteins:** an overall quality of *dryness*, but with some degree of either *heat* or *coldness*, depending on the source of the protein.
- **Carbohydrates:** an overall quality of *moistness*, but with some degree of *heat* or *coldness*, also depending on the source of the carbohydrate.
- **Fats:** an overall quality of *heat*, with different degrees of *moistness*, and minimal amounts of *dryness* and *coldness*.
- **Minerals:** an overall quality of *coldness* and *dryness*.
- **Water:** an overall quality of *moistness*.

This means that over a period of time the person's overall internal qualities are affected to a greater or lesser extent by the qualities of the food consumed. It also follows that if a person's qualitative balance is disturbed to any substantial degree, then this can be reversed or corrected, and balance restored, by consuming food with certain qualities.

Tibb therefore considers that we are all affected by both the quantity of food consumed, but by the qualitative nature of the components it contains.

From the Tibb perspective, anything consumed regularly and deliberately by mouth can be divided into different categories. Each of these can affect a person's health, positively or negatively.

- **Diet**

The food we consume to provide routine nutrition and energy, and which are made up of the components identified above. When we take this, no real changes to the person occur, or are expected, apart from alleviation of hunger. The body extracts from the food what it can use and returns to the environment what it cannot use, together with any waste material or products of metabolism.

- **Herbs and spices**

These are often added to food to make it more palatable or attractive, and at the same time their medicinal properties contribute towards improving a person's general health. Onions, garlic, ginger and almonds fall into this category.

- **Therapeutics**

These are substances which are used for medical reasons, but which have nutritive content. Teas made from herbs like peppermint, chamomile or rooibos are examples. A number of foods are able to boost the immune system. Nutraceuticals fall into this category.

- **Pharmaceutics**

These substances change specific functions in the person's body. These can be artificial or synthetic chemicals, or extracts from animal, plant or fungi which are biologically active. These latter substances may be chemically modified for increased effect, better tolerance, longer duration of action, or commercial, patent-related reasons. Modern medicine is largely based on these agents. Many pharmaceutics are supplements, such as vitamins and micro-nutrients. The new science of '*orthomolecular medicine*' is one form of pharmaceutics. This includes single chemical entities like arginine, MSM and omega-3, which boost particular functions in the body.

Tibb has also classified different items of food into whether they are qualitatively heating or cooling, coupled to whether they are moist or dry. So there are specific foods which are *heating*, but with different levels of either dryness or moistness. Similarly, there are other foods which are *cooling*, but with either dryness or moistness.

In Tibb philosophy, the concept of the qualities of heating and cooling, moistness and dryness, is linked to the effect of different foods have on the person's bodily metabolism and formation of the humours. Heating foods will increase the body's basic metabolic rate, and cooling foods will have the opposite effect. For some diseases, like rheumatic disorders, heating foods should be used. For other disorders, like hepatitis, cooling foods are more beneficial.

According to Tibb, heating foods and spices confer a number of benefits:

- They increase the production of digestive enzymes in the gut
- They help the body digest food efficiently
- They promote the assimilation of micro-nutrients (vitamins, co-factors, minerals) into the body
- They increase the metabolic rate in body cells

Another factor is the heavy demand made upon the body's energy status by the digestive process. Eating food

Tibb considers that most chronic diseases arise from an excess of Cold and Dry foods, aggravated by a lack of body heat.

spiced with the heating spices ginger, cumin and cinnamon boosts the production of digestive enzymes dramatically.

A balanced diet including heating foods is essential for the effective digestion of nutrients, and their subsequent elimination. If the body's innate heat is reduced, then digestion, absorption and metabolism will be impaired, together with the elimination of waste products. This will result in a build up of the qualities of coldness and dryness. The South African diet typically contains many foods which are cold in nature, like yogurt, cold drinks and salads, or drying in nature, like large amounts of red meat. This leads to the opposite state required for the maintenance of an ideal body temperament of Hot and Moist. According to Tibb, most chronic diseases arise due to an excess of coldness and dryness, with corresponding loss of body heat.

Tibb and dietotherapy

A key pillar of Tibb philosophy is the concept of the *Lifestyle Factors*. These are the main determinants of our health (see box). If a person develops a poor way of life, by adopting poor quality, aberrant behaviours, chronic diseases are most likely to develop. When this happens, the Tibb physician's role is to direct the person away from these self-destructive activities and towards a more harmonious lifestyle, by offering realistic and practical suggestions for improvement.

From the Tibb perspective, arguably the most important Lifestyle Factor is the food and drink we consume. It reflects the importance of food as a provider of energy and material. It is absolutely essential in maintaining harmony in each and every area of the body: metabolism, energy provision, growth, repair, reproduction, communication, protection, waste disposal, etc. When a person's food and drink consumption is out of balance for some time, disharmony begins to manifest in the body. This provides the terrain for many chronic disorders to develop.

A major concept in Tibb is that of the ***Lifestyle Factors***, These are personal behaviours which each of us are involved with on a daily basis.

The major ones are:

- **Environmental air and breathing**
- **Food and drink**
- **Sleep and wakefulness**
- **Movement and rest**
- **Emotional state**
- **Elimination of toxins**

These have important influences on our state of health and disease.

Dietotherapy is aimed at restoring the person's original harmony brought about by an unwise lifestyle. Its underlying role is to support Physis in its quest to restore inner healing. It is aware that a person's age has to be taken into account when food and drink requirements are determined. An old person requires different food than a young one; a pregnant woman has different needs to a male athlete. Tibb provides diet advice for all age groups, and perhaps equally important, for people of different temperaments

A factor of importance when eating is the environment in which it is carried out. Tibb accepts and advises that food should be eaten in clean, relaxed and congenial surroundings. This important activity should also be as free as possible from negative emotions like anger, anxiety and sorrow. It should not be eaten at unusual times, especially late at night. By doing so, the person will not be able to digest the food properly, and this can lead to indigestion in the short-term and irritable bowel syndrome over a longer period of time.

Dietotherapy and temperament

Temperament is an important feature of a person, which defines his or her uniqueness. In Tibb it is an indispensable characteristic, important in diagnosis and treatment. The main aspects are:

- Personality characteristics, including emotional features
- Personal habits regarding regular diet, sleeping patterns, physical exercise and rest
- Physiological characteristics, including age and gender, and the efficiency of excretion mechanisms
- Physical demeanour, appearance and bodily physique

All foods possess their own unique temperament, made up of a combination of qualities.

- **Protein**, a major component of a balanced diet, is predominantly *hot*, with the second quality being either dry or moist, depending on the particular food.
- **Fats** possess an overall quality of *heat* also, with different degrees of moistness, but little dryness and coldness.
- **Carbohydrates** are predominantly *moist*, with some being hot and others cold as the second quality. Dryness is least.
- **Minerals** or **electrolytes** are invariably *cold* and *dry*.
- **Water**, not unexpectedly, is predominantly *cold* and *moist*.

This division of different foods according to temperament and qualities is important for dietotherapy. If a disease is characterised by having certain qualities which have brought disharmony to the person, then treatment generally aims to restore harmony by counteracting the imbalance in qualities. For example, a disorder like acne, which is an imbalance in the Dry and Hot qualities, is treated in dietotherapy by foods which have moistness and coldness as their primary qualities. Likewise, sinusitis, which is usually a Cold and Moist condition, will respond more to foods which are hot and dry qualitatively. The planning of a suitable diet for someone with a particular ailment therefore requires (a) identifying the qualities linked to the ailment, and (b) consuming food which redress the balance in qualities.

The table below* summarises a number of common foods and their particular temperament (qualities):

Temperament (Qualities)	Typical foods
Hot and Moist	Liver, mutton, turkey, ginger, olives, bananas, mangos, peaches, almonds, wheat products, rye, cheese, sunflower oil, pepper, turmeric, green tea, honey, chocolate, licorice, most cereals.
Cold and Moist	Duck, rabbit, cucumber, butternut, pears, figs, melons, apples, cranberries, rice, semolina, corn flour, milk and its products (butter, custard, shakes), coriander, cumin, vanilla, rose syrup,
Hot and Dry	Chicken, shellfish, game birds, red/green peppers, oily fish, garlic, onions, grapes, mustard, cashew and pecan nuts, eggs, cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg, chillies, peri-peri, garlic, alcohol.
Cold and Dry	Beef, biltong, white fish, pork, cabbage, cauliflower, tomatoes, sweet potatoes, mielie, mushrooms, citrus fruits, avocados, peanuts, beans, samp, yogurt, basil, prunes, black tea, coffee, vinegar.

(*) A more detailed list of foods and their qualities is available from the Tibb Institute.

Dietotherapy and maintaining good health

Tibb advises that a person should try to eat according to his or her temperament. In this way, Physis is supported, and the risk of developing a chronic disorder of Lifestyle is reduced.

- Someone with a predominantly **sanguinous** temperament should go for cold and dry foods which do not increase the Hot and Moist qualities. A diet with balanced or equal amounts of protein, fruit and vegetables salads should be selected.
- If a person is predominantly **phlegmatic** in nature, then food with Hot and Dry qualities should favour high-fibre fruit and high-protein items like chicken, eggs, sea-foods and liver. Onion and garlic intake should be increased, and herbs like fenugreek, saffron and cloves should be taken. Fluid intake should be relatively greater than average. Two main meals daily, separated by several hours, should be adopted.
- Health maintenance in the **bilious** temperament is supported by a Cold and Moist diet rich in fruit (e.g., pear, fig, watermelon, litchi, citrus) and vegetables (cucumber, lettuce), with less than usual heavy red meats. Water intake should be higher than average. Milk drinks are also fine, as are spices like coriander and cardamom.
- The person with a predominantly **melancholic** temperament should opt for a diet which is rich in Hot and Moist foods. Fruits like mangoes, peaches and bananas should be favoured, together with milk, cheese and honey, and meats like lamb, mutton and liver. Ginger is a beneficial herb to take regularly, and salt is fine.

The book*: "***Cooking for your body type – everyday meals to suit your temperament***" [Vallee N & Bhikha R] has listed different recipes, different foods and beverages according to their qualities. It also has a section which covers the use of specific diets for specific illnesses. This book can be an easy-to-use guide to the application of dietotherapy.

(*) *This book is available on request from the Tibb Institute.*

Summary

Tibb places great emphasis upon the nature of the foods and drink we consume, and the environment where people eat. It considers that most ailments arise primarily from long-term errors in the person's nutrition and eating practice. The rationale for dietotherapy is that disorders brought about by a faulty diet can be reversed by changes to this diet. In practice, dietotherapy involves a programme of dietary modification in order to address the underlying disequilibrium in temperament. It aims to support Physis in reversing deleterious changes, and restoring inner harmony by judicious advice to the person on the type and amount of food, and their qualities, in the light of his or her temperament. Tibb recommends different foods for consumption or avoidance to deal with the clinical disorder presently affecting the person. The consumption of specific foods is encouraged, and the omission of deleterious foods discouraged. The digestive process itself - digestion, assimilation and residue expulsion - also comes under scrutiny.

Further reading

"***Cooking for your body type – everyday meals to suit your temperament***". Vallee N & Bhikha R.

"***4 Temperaments; 6 Lifestyle Factors***" Dr Rashid Bhikha

Dietotherapy. Online at: http://www.tkdI.res.in/tkdI/Langdefault/Unani/Una_diet.asp

The four humors: Agents of metabolism. Online at: http://www.greekmedicine.net/b_p/Four_Humors.html