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A Science of Medicine
The Art of Care

Dietotherapy: “Let food be your medicine”

Part 2: Practical applications

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Background

The basic Tibb concept underlying dietotherapy is that many internal ailments arise from an imbalance in the person's qualities, or a lack of inner *homeostasis*. The person's regular food and drink intake, if selected properly, can restore

***“Leave your drugs in the chemist's pot,
if you can heal the patient with food”.***
[Hippocrates]

desirable balance to the body. This is done by selecting foods which possess the qualities which are deficient in the body. In addition, the person's temperament has to be taken into account, to avoid aggravating

the underlying imbalance in qualities. Another factor which must be considered is that any food and drink taken must support the efforts of *Physis*, or the power behind inner healing. Finally, the degree of hydration of the person with the disorder must be maintained in the normal range for the person, to avoid stressing *Physis*.

The use of dietotherapy to prevent and treat numerous diseases is becoming increasingly common, for a number of reasons. First, it is far cheaper than medical intervention, as it reduces the need for medicines and constant monitoring. Second, it is cost-effective; simple dietary changes, adopted in good time, will dispense with, or reduce the need for, drugs used to treat a number of chronic ailments such as hypertension and type II diabetes. Third, dietotherapy confers a high degree of empowerment on the person. This prevents the consolidation of a “victim” mentality, and helps maintain a person's self-esteem.

One recent development in dietotherapy is the use of partial or total fasting, either to try and restore normal body mass, or deal with a particular common ailment, such as type II diabetes. This approach, advocated by Tibb for centuries, allows *Physis* uninterrupted time in which to restore inner homeostasis, and so help alleviate the particular ailment.

Tibb and water intake

An important precondition for effective nutrition is a proper level of water within the body. Tibb regards heat and moisture as the predominant qualities of the body, as they make up the natural, basic state. If the water content of the

Water makes up a sizeable percentage of our body weight – around 65% overall, but as much as 80% for the lungs and 95% for the brain, according to different estimates.

body begins to fall to dangerous levels, then there is a *physis response*. The thirst mechanism will come into play, encouraging the person to drink more water and so replenish desirable levels in the

body. This response comes into play when the body has lost as little as 2% of its normal content. When the body is well hydrated and in water-equilibrium, the urine is pale yellow in colour, and urination occurs several times daily.

If a person drinks too much water, then electrolyte homeostasis is upset. A condition (*hyponatraemia*) may develop, in which blood levels of the electrolyte sodium will fall, causing several threatening symptoms, due to many cells in the body becoming waterlogged.

If we are in good health, we can handle an excessive intake of water by increasing, via hormonal and other mechanisms, the activity of our kidneys. However, dealing with an abnormally low level of body water – dehydration – can pose problems.

Without regular intake of sufficient water we would die within a few days. It is the vital element in maintaining virtually every process in the body, from digestion and absorption of food, to metabolism of the nutrients and the elimination of waste products. It is the main element driving the circulation of blood and lymph. Nothing works in the body without the all-pervading presence of water, whether it is cell division at the lowest level, or physical movement at the highest. It is completely essential for the daily maintenance of the body.

The need for adequate water to maintain life explains the strong, instinctive need to drink regularly. It also explains why the basic quality of all living beings is moist.

Basic functions of water

Blood is mainly water (~92%). Its primary function is to carry nutrients and oxygen to all parts of the body, and remove waste products. These are then excreted from the body via the kidneys, skin and liver.

There are also a number of other functions.

As a general lubricant:

- Water serves as a lubricant in chewing, swallowing, digestion, gut motility and excretion.
- Water makes up much of the synovial fluid, which lubricates our joints and cartilages, allowing them to move smoothly.

Regulating body temperature:

- Over-heating is prevented by evaporation of water as skin perspiration, which produces a cooling effect.
- Blood is routed into the surface of the skin, where it is cooled and returned to the body's interior.

Eliminating harmful toxins:

- Water aids bowel movements, so preventing toxin build-up and health problems.
- Water flushes toxins and body waste from the body through urination and perspiration.
- Water lessens the burden of the kidney's and the liver's excretory activities.

Many people will benefit from routinely and regularly drinking more water, as they are on the edge of becoming dehydrated.

Water and disease prevention

A mere 2% fall in our body's water content can cause fatigue, and trigger dehydration, leading to deteriorating memory, thinking and vision.

Water plays a key role in preventing disease. Numerous disorders are linked to low body fluids. Common examples are kidney stones, skin dryness, kidney failure and digestive problems. When the water content of

the body is in balance, the risk of colon cancer can be reduced by as much as 45%, bladder cancer by 50%, and the risk of breast cancer may be reduced substantially.

One study found that women who drank five glasses of water or more a day were more than 40% less likely to die from a heart attack than those who drank less than two glasses. The protective effect of water was even greater in men.

From the Tibb perspective, people with a predominantly cold quality, such as phlegmatics or melancholics, should avoid consuming cold water (and fluids), as this aggravates any qualitative imbalance. Instead they should choose warm, room temperature drinks. On the other hand, people with a predominantly hot quality, such as those of a sanguinous or bilious temperament, are fine with cold drinks.

Practical advice on water intake

In adults, an adequate daily intake of total water and beverages for males is about 13 cups, and females 10 cups.

We lose water constantly through our urine, breath, sweat and bowel movements. To keep our body in water balance we need to replenish it constantly, otherwise our health will begin to suffer. We do this by drinking water and non-alcoholic beverages, and eating moist foods.

- Drink regularly and frequently throughout the day, especially in a dry climate like ours, to avoid chronic dehydration.
- Avoid drinking too much water during a meal, to help optimise digestion. Drink well before, and an hour or so after meals.
- Drink a glass of water before consuming a caffeine-rich beverage like coffee.
- Drink more water in hot climates or seasons, especially if beer or high-caffeine drinks are being consumed – these can lead to dehydration.
- If domestic tap water is the preferred choice, use a filter. This removes impurities such as toxic metals, which can lead to cancer, damage to the nervous system, and reduced growth and development in children.

Fasting as part of Tibb dietotherapy

A major part of dietotherapy is to make suitable adjustments not only to the types of foods, but also to the quantity of foods. When the quantity of food is severely restricted, then the person is fasting. This has been shown to be effective in treating many different illnesses.

Fasting is the “deliberate and controlled abstinence from solid foods for a certain, defined period of time”. It is probably the oldest therapeutic method of natural healing known, and is regarded by Tibb practitioners as a major technique for maintaining or improving health. By giving respite to the digestive system, especially the liver, the person’s Physis is allowed to carry out any necessary repairs and remove toxins. Also, fasting is a natural response by Physis to overeating, or food bingeing, or when a disease is developing.

Everyone needs to have periods of rest, so that Physis can work uninterrupted.

The duration and strictness of a fast is usually worked out according to the age and physical condition of the person. Usually, a twelve-hour fast is sufficient, during which only warm water should be drunk. This clears the digestive tract of food residue, and allows herbal remedies to act optimally.

If the fasting is for extended periods of time, there may be early adverse reactions, such as diarrhoea, headaches, vomiting and bad breath. These reactions usually occur during the first few days, but usually fade away, together with hunger pangs.

When fasting, the enzymes which are normally involved in the digestive processes are freed to carry out healing.

Fasting has a number of health benefits. It appears to prevent the formation of cancers.

Fasting is a way of giving the body time to reorganise itself, and concentrate its resources on ridding itself of diseases and toxins, rather than using them in digesting food. During the fast, heat is not being generated by the digestive process as the stomach is empty,

and this allows Physis to consolidate all available energy for healing purposes. By emptying the stomach, blood circulation in the digestive tract slows down considerably, so allowing Physis to deal with changes in the balance of qualities that lead to disease.

Key features of fasting are:

- **Reason.** The intention of the fast should be declared, in order to provide focus. Is it to lose weight, detoxify the body, or deal with a specific disorder?
- **Duration.** The duration of the fast should be appropriate for the person's state of health, age and occupational requirements, and decided upon in advance. It should not compromise health, or interfere unduly with essential activities.
- **Avoid.** Fasting should not be undertaken during illness, pregnancy, or nursing, unless permitted by a physician.
- **Finish.** The fast should not be broken with a large meal, as this overextends the stomach's capacity to digest it. It can also impose a great strain on the body's metabolic processes, especially on the liver.

Tibb dietotherapy in practice

All foods have their own qualities. There are foods which are by nature hot, and those which are cold. The hot ones are sub-divided in turn into those which are *hot and dry*, and those which are *hot and moist*. The cooling foods are also sub-divided into those that are *cold and dry*, and those which are *cold and moist*.

So when a particular disorder is due to a disturbance or imbalance in one or more qualities, then specific foods can be selected to help restore the person's qualitative balance. If, for example, a person suffers from a Hot & Dry disorder such as hepatitis, then foods should be selected which counteract this imbalance, and restore balance. So foods with qualities of cold and moist would be selected, such as figs, cucumber and dairy products.

The table below gives examples of different food items, and their qualities:

Typical foods	Associated Qualities
Liver, mutton, turkey, ginger, olives, bananas, mangos, peaches, almonds, wheat products, rye, cheese, sunflower oil, pepper, turmeric, green tea, honey, chocolate, liquorice, most cereals.	Hot & 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,	Cold & Moist
Chicken, shellfish, game birds, red/green peppers, oily fish, garlic, onions, grapes, mustard, cashew	Hot & Dry

and pecan nuts, eggs, cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg, chillies, peri-peri, garlic, alcohol.	
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.	Cold & Dry

How effective is dietotherapy?

The use of dietotherapy in the treatment and prevention of most diseases has not been explored as extensively as the use of pharmaceutical agents. In spite of this, there is now a growing body of evidence that dietotherapy will contribute positively in the treatment of numerous diseases.

Changing the balance of foods is undeniably effective. For example, recent studies have shown that adopting a

Common to the dietotherapy measures adopted is that they all support Physis.

Mediterranean-style diet can reduce by one-third the incidence of heart attacks, strokes and early death in people at high risk of heart disease. That is, people also affected by the so-called deadly quartet: hypertension, lipid disorders, diabetes and obesity – also known as the *metabolic syndrome*.

Guidelines for dietotherapy

The way we eat our food is important, as it affects the digestive process enormously.

- Food should only be consumed when the person is hungry, and in a calm and relaxed mental state. Otherwise, the digestive system will not function properly, and digestive disorders can develop.

The food we eat, and how we eat it, plays a major role in helping us control our state of health, and avoid disease.

There should be an interval of four to five hours between meals. Ideally, nothing should be consumed between meals, apart from simple fluids like water, teas and beverages. This allows the digestive juices to return

to normal in volume and content. Otherwise, digestion will not be complete, and functional ailments like constipation can develop.

- When eating, the person should try to concentrate on the food being eaten, and not be distracted by other activities. This helps efficient digestion, especially by not interrupting the flow of digestive juices and secretion of hormones.
- The person should consume food and drink when seated in quiet, relaxed surroundings.
- Food should be chewed properly, and not gulped down in a hurry. This ensures that the digestive enzymes from the salivary glands are thoroughly mixed into the food being chewed. Eating “on the run” should definitely be avoided.
- Easily digestible foods should not be combined with foods which are dense and digested slowly. A combination of beans and beef should be avoided, as should milk products and fish.

If any food makes you feel nauseous or sick in any way, listen to your Physis, and stop taking it immediately.

- The person eating should not drink water (or other fluids) extensively before eating, or for a reasonable time afterwards.
 - Food should not be eaten when the stomach is upset.
 - After a meal, a short nap should be taken if this is possible

and convenient. This helps the person's digestive processes.

- Physical exertion should be avoided for an hour or so.

Most people start feeling better within a few days, and definitely within a few weeks.

Different forms of dietotherapy

There are a number of Tibb dietotherapy regimens. These have been designed to deal with particular health and ailment situations.

- **Fasting or abstinence.** This aims to take the digestive load off the person's Physis, so helping in recovery from a disease. It also helps to ward off the onset of ailments in general, and when trying to reduce body mass. The person involved must be physically strong enough to accept this.
- **Reduced food intake.** This entails decreased food intake, either in quantity or quality. This aims to support Physis, especially in the elimination of waste matter and toxins.
- **Increase in fibre content.** This involves a gradual change to consuming food which is high in fibre content, and less nutrient-dense. Fruits and vegetables are present in large amounts in this diet. It does not impose any strain on Physis. Water intake should be increased to avoid constipation.
- **Low fibre food consumption.** This means changing to food which is relatively low in fibre content, and more nutrient-dense, especially with proteins and fats. This regimen is designed to support Physis, and is used in cachexic or debilitated patients and convalescents.
- **Energy boost food intake.** This contains foodstuffs which are energy-dense and easily absorbed. This is expressly for convalescents, older people, and those recovering from serious disease or injury. Often included in this diet are honey and bananas.

Dietotherapy and mental health

From the dietary side, it has long been known that the food we consume can also affect our mental health. There is a definite effect on our mood if we consume too much "junk food". There is, for example, plenty of evidence that a diet too rich in sugar and fructose (corn) syrup can make a child hyperactive. So, to avoid a number of serious and not-so-serious unwelcome behaviours in children, it may only need changing the daily regular diet to exclude or severely restrict these foods and drinks. Also, choosing a proper diet can help us maintain a healthy heart and circulation system. Deficiencies in certain vitamins are also known to lead to deteriorating mental health, especially depression.

From the dietotherapy side, there is some evidence that food, or particular components of it, are capable of improving certain mental disorders.

Amongst these are:

- The fatty acid **omega-3**, present in oily fish, nuts and flaxseed. In some studies, people taking omega-3 supplements showed distinct improvement in their mood. Omega-3 fatty acids may influence the way your brain sends signals throughout the body.
- **Tryptophan**, an essential amino acid present in bananas, red meats, dairy products and soy. This is converted to serotonin, a neurotransmitter. Low levels of this are involved in the onset of clinical depression.
- **Magnesium** is a mineral that is found in foods like avocados, nuts and vegetables of the cabbage family. It is essential for the production of energy and in the efficient workings of the muscles, arteries and heart. Research suggests that patients who take extra magnesium recover more quickly from depression.

- **Folic acid** and **vitamin B₁₂** are vitamins that are essential for the creation of blood cells, and in overall body metabolism. Folic acid is plentiful in fruits and leafy green vegetables, and vitamin B₁₂ in meat, fish and dairy products. Many depressed people have low levels of these vitamins.

Foods containing the above components may have a role to play in treating depression, although the evidence for this is limited. However, they will probably help support other therapies when dealing with emotional problems.

Summary

“*Let food be your medicine, and let medicine be your food*”. So said Hippocrates, many centuries ago. He was right then, and he is even more right now; we know far more than he and other historical healthcare pioneers did about the

“We should eat to live, not live to eat” [Moliere, 17th Century writer]

nature of food, how it is digested and used by the body; about the role of vitamins, minerals, micro-nutrients and water. What we do have more evidence for is the huge influence food has in the maintenance of health and prevention of

disease. The real key to preventing disease and promoting health is not the consumption of certain foods, although these may (or may not) help enormously. It is the logical and reasonable use of different foods to support our inner Physis in maintaining optimum health, and to treat disease if and when it appears. It must be applied with due regard to the person’s temperament, and in the light of the qualities which have been disrupted by the ailment. If this route is followed, and due regard paid to the Tibb Lifestyle Factors, then the person should enjoy a long and healthy life. This is the Tibb approach based on centuries of experience, observation and tradition.

Further reading

Cooking for your body type. Nasira Vallee and Rashid Bhikha – Ibn Sina Institute of Tibb 2003

Coronary heart disease: nutritional considerations. Online at:
www.nutritionmd.org/health_care_providers/cardiovascular/chd_nutrition.html

Dietary therapy for coronary heart disease. Online at: www.aafb.org/afp/1998/0315/p1299.html

Dietotherapy: Let food be your medicine. Online at: http://www.tibb.co.za/research_reviews.html

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