

Your Most Important Patient Conversation This Holiday Season: Mindful Eating

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The importance of digestive health is a key conversation to have with your patients during the winter months. During the colder months, we tend to eat heavier, rich, high-protein foods. From a TCM perspective, this type of diet may lead to patterns of food stagnation and spleen *qi* vacuity.

In previous articles, I have discussed many important TCM patent medicines, herbal formulas and acupuncture points that boost spleen *qi* and improve digestion - all or which should be kept in mind during the winter months. However, let's discuss two other important, potentially overlooked elements of digestive health you should discuss with patients.

Teach Mindful Eating

While herbal medicine and acupuncture are the tools practitioners use to help assist patients, we must remember it is just as important to discuss mindset with the patient. This is extremely important when discussing issues of nutrition and digestion, especially during the winter months. A patient's mindset before eating or preparing foods has a significant impact on how their body digests food. With that in mind, let's discuss the concepts of *equanimity* and *gratitude*.

Equanimity

Equanimity during mealtime refers to the idea of eating or preparing meals with calmness and composure, which optimizes the parasympathetic nervous system and healthy digestion. Meals should be eaten in a calm environment and with a calm mindset in order to facilitate balanced and efficient digestion. Eating with a calm state of mind and eating slowly, appreciating each flavor and nuance of the meal, is in many ways much more important than taking herbal medicine or digestive enzymes.

It is not uncommon for my patients to eat while driving and eat while watching television. No amount of herbal medicine or acupuncture can improve these issues. Anytime I encounter a patient presenting with digestive complaints, I always inquire if they eat while driving, watching television or in a hurried manner. Eating slowly and in a relaxed manner are habits that help harmonize the liver and spleen from a TCM perspective.

Gratitude

Another important concept to discuss with patients is *gratitude*. In today's world, we have access to almost any kind of food at almost any hour of the day. This is not something to take for granted. I always encourage patients to take the time to appreciate the food they prepare and consume. As mentioned earlier, meals are often rushed and eaten too quickly. Taking a moment to calm the mind and show gratitude for meals can help the mind enter a parasympathetic state more conducive to digestion than the stressed-out sympathetic state.

I encourage patients to take 2-3 minutes before eating to slow the breath, calm the mind, and feel a sense of gratitude for the opportunity to sit and consume a meal. Just like equanimity, gratitude can be just as important as herbal medicine and acupuncture in calming the *shen* and harmonizing the liver and spleen to facilitate healthy digestion.

Take-Home Message

I hope this conversation stimulates you to discuss these concepts with patients when targeting digestive disorders and digestive health. All too often, clinicians focus only on food allergies, herbal medicine and dietary energetics, yet forget the importance of eating slowly with a sense of gratitude.

Beyond their stand-alone value, these suggestions can also dramatically improve patient response to prescribed therapies - a win-win for their health. So this holiday season, teach your patients to slow down, appreciate their meals and celebrate health!

DECEMBER 2020