

## **Nurturing the Spleen: Making Your Digestion Stronger**

I'm just surprised how much of the time our solutions to many chronic health problems involve improving the functions of the Spleen.

First of all I will have to clarify that the Spleen in Chinese medicine and the spleen in western physiology are not the same thing. Moreover, the Chinese defined the organs of function and their interrelationship long before anyone ever cut into the body and decided what it might actually look like. Reality of the workings of the human body was decided by how it "must be" because of the observed logic of the human body and amassed empirical data. The real misnomer happened when western medicine chose certain nomenclature to define the workings of Chinese medicine according to their own logic.

In western medicine we would see an organ according to its immediate function only. The spleen in western medicine is an organ on the outside of the pancreas that is similar in function to the cells of the liver, but has more to do with destruction of old blood cells and the production of certain types of white blood cells. In western physiology, mostly we only speak of organs in terms of function and location. In Chinese medicine we would look at the Spleen as part of the whole function of the body, or more importantly the body-mind. If, in actual terms, we were to define the functions of the Spleen it would encompass some of the pancreas the duodenum and the large intestine. It is the very center of the functions of the human body, as it is the digestive ability of the body and the deciding force as to whether we are to have continued energy and vivacity, which we would convert from food and nutrition to ensure a continuing long and vital life.

In Chinese medicine the spleen is seen as a pot that converts food to a nutritious steam that ascends to the heart and lung, which converts this to energy and sends it down to the remaining parts of the body. As long as this is an active process the pot is dry and warm, which allows it to convert the essence of this nutrition to a rising steam. The enemy of the Spleen is therefore the cold and the damp. When the forces of the Spleen become damp the pot does not convert this energy to a fine mist, but instead allows the energy to descend much like a swampy soup.

As this continues the body will generally become damper and more laden. This is shown by a certain amount of thirstlessness and sluggishness. The body might even become rounder rather than angular and more defined (see: [The Swamp Inside Us](#)). In the winter, so full of water, the person will generally be colder and even less prone to drinking. So often patients assume that to stop the dampness, they must also stop drinking, which is of course wrong. However, when appropriate, the person should drink their water hotter or at least warm. In fact, if a person is prone to this problem at all, they should pretty much do this year round.

One of the biggest problems with causing dampness is too many sweets. The body sees sweets as if it was a mineral and adds the appropriate amount of dampness to enact its usage. Australian aborigines would always carry a special pebble with them in case they ran out of water so that the body would be allowed to foment this storage of water against the threat of dehydration. Our parents were wise to admonish us not to eat sweets before a meal as it would destroy our healthy appetites. More likely, physiologically, our

pancreas, which is the main organ that breaks down and makes food absorbable for digestion, is used up in the processing of sugar. Here it has to pull out the big guns for digestion, the insulin, and needs time to build up for the next big meal. It also has to search for fat cells or space in the liver to store it in.

Consequently, when it comes time for the balanced meal, there is no appetite and the food that we do eat (because our moms would kill us if she knew that we ignored her orders) becomes stagnant in the stomach and eventually can cause constipation or diarrhea because it is not adequately broken down. In North America, our health is more threatened by too much food than too little and we are coming to know that this society of consumption associated with happiness and “good times” is probably overdone. If undigested food is caught in the small and large intestines, the body can create allergies to it and could form pockets in the large intestine which could be later termed diverticulosis.

Another problem is just the frequency or irregularity of eating. I have seen many movies about the happy chef who is popping food in his or her mouth while preparing a dinner, but if you really try this your digestive juices will be used up by dinner time, and you will be watching your guests eat while sickishly peck at your food, not enjoying the taste. Hunger is the best palliative.

Along with this, most of us eat when we can, usually a victim of our work lives. Many of my patients tell me that their lives are so full and demanding that they never have time for breakfast and because of their dedication to their jobs often have to skip lunch. Half of North America comes home from a day given to the job and sits down feeling tired and looks to the food on their plate to assuage their tiredness. They eat quickly and consequently overeat. Then they proceed to enjoy the evening free time that they’ve earned and don’t get to bed early enough. Because they are up later they become tired again and instead of going to bed they eat something and then will go to bed or fall asleep on the couch in front of the television. This causes them to sleep poorly and so they get up in the morning, leaving just enough time to get to work. They aren’t hungry for breakfast because they still have undigested food in their stomachs from what they ate before going to sleep the night before. They skip breakfast and still are sleepy tired for which they will substitute food, usually sweets or coffee, for the rest they cannot afford to catch up on. And so the cycle continues as does the misshapen digestion, the obesity and the resultant Spleen Qi (pronounced chi) deficiency. In considering a healthy spleen, we should stop eating at least three hours before bed, and ideally have a twelve hour gap or “fast” between dinner and break the fast (breakfast) with hunger on the first meal of the day.

### **Diagnosing Spleen Qi Deficiency**

Needless to say, Spleen Qi Deficiency is one of my more common diagnosis and as I said before, it is at the very center of the Chinese medical paradigm. If you are not able to dynamically convert food to blood and usable tissues you will suffer sickness. In the same respect reversing many chronic issues means rectifying the function of the Spleen and its energy or Qi.

Some of the more common western diagnosis related to this deficiency are: chronic diarrhea, chronic constipation, irritable bowel disease, hypothyroid dysfunction, anemia, chronic fatigue, sleep disorders and of course diabetes.

As these inefficiencies continue the dampness can cause related disorders such as lung and kidney problems. In the lung, this much dampness laying around will eventually be the wellsprings of excess phlegm buildup leading to congestion or edema in the lung tissues. This can of course lead to forms of pneumonia or even pleurisy. This same dampness can fall down to overload the kidneys and become a place of growth for kidney and bladder dysfunctions, not to mention the inability of the kidneys to process it leading to edema of the legs and feet.

One more important reflection on the interrelationship of the Spleen is the fact that, like its associated organ the stomach, both suffer from and cause worry and over thinking. When our digestive system does not function, we do not think well. Our thinking is foggy and laden and we are more prone to worry and obsess. If the weather is also damp, our very ability to stay awake for concentration is almost impossible, and we just want to curl up and go to sleep.

Further to this, we find that Spleen deficiency is directly behind most cases of anxiety and panic as one worry builds on another and our rational sense of handling our problems becomes near impossible to control. The root of reversing this most often begins with correcting our lives to make our spleens stronger.

### **Conclusions**

Most of us are trained to think of our sickness as something extra in our lives. We think of doing battle with external forces and look outward from our selves to assess where our troubles may be coming from ( see: [The Root of the Plant](#) – this issue). Truly, most of the time we have to go out and deal with the problem at hand, as this is the diseased branch. However, as a practitioner, I rarely get a chance to get back to fully rectifying the spleen. Because of the demand for quick results, I cannot afford to take the time and start with the spleen to see the sickness and the body eventually rectify itself. But this is too bad, as this is the center of our lives and the true way to permanent and long lasting health.