

Nutrition in Context of Four Humors

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Nutrition- if is defined in one word it would be Moderation.

The concept of nutrition has been around for millennia. Practices relating to food and nutrition are steeped in history and complex beliefs. Food was treasured due to its phenomenal impact on optimal body function.

In Medieval physiology (2000 yrs back approximately), four humors were believed to maintain homeostasis within the body.

Greek physician Hippocrates (founding father of medicine) often credited with developing the theory of the four humors-and their influence on body and emotions, classified them as:

1. Blood (season associated is spring) - believed to be associated with sanguine (optimistic) temperament.
2. Yellow bile (choler) season associated is summer - identified with bile and believed to be associated with a peevish (bad) temperament.
3. Black bile (season associated is autumn) - believed to be secreted by kidneys/spleen and to cause melancholy (sadness).
4. Phlegm (season associated is Winter) - believed to be associated with apathetic (calm) temperament.

All needed to remain in balance - too much or too little of one humor would result in illness:

- Age
- Time of the year
- Gender
- Occupation and
- Place of living influenced the balance of humors within a person.

Food, Drink as well as 'blood letting (either by physicians or leeches)' were used to correct and rebalance humors.

The mind and the body were believed as a single entity and people were advised to eat different foods not only when they were ill but also when they were "weak of character" particularly if depressed or angry because mood and disposition were also thought to be affected by humoral balance.

GALEN also stated that lack of equilibrium between the four humors influenced people's way of acting, feeling, and thinking.

The nature and temperament of food

The impact of food on the body, primarily in terms of the Four Basic Qualities: Hot, Cold, Wet and Dry, enables us to individualize our preferences and flexibility in selection of foods that complement or cure imbalances of humor.

Hot/Cold is the primary or active polarity, while Dry/Wet is the passive or secondary polarity:

- Heating Foods: Stimulate metabolism e.g. spices, garlic, onions, wheat, meat, eggs, nuts, seeds, olives, lemon, apples, aged cheese.
- Cooling Foods: Sedate metabolism (relieve excess heat) e.g. milk and dairy products, yogurt, fresh cheese, fish, bananas, most tropical fruits, melons, watermelon, mint, lettuce, cucumber.
- Wet Foods: Unctuous, oily and emollient e.g. milk and dairy products, fresh cheese, yogurt, bananas, avocados, coconut.
- Dry Foods: Physically dry (aid in eliminating excess fluids) e.g. most beans, soybeans, pomegranates, asparagus, dried fruits, aged cheese.
- Light Foods (imbibing qualities of Dry Foods): Induce agility and alertness, but excess can cause lightheadedness and emaciation e.g. rice flakes, popcorn, sunflower seeds.
- Heavy Foods (bearing qualities closely related to Wet Foods): Give strength and endurance, but can produce sluggishness and heaviness, and are difficult to digest e.g. beef, wheat, greasy/fried foods.

Foods and the four humors

It was postulated that certain foods can aggravate a particular humor; hence, their consumption should be limited to keep imbalance at bay. The main problematic foods are:

- Phlegm: Dairy products, refined carbs, glutinous foods, ice cold drinks and creamy foods.
- Yellow Bile: Salty, fatty and fried foods, vinegar, alcohol, sour or fermented foods, aged cheese, hot spices/chillies, red meat.
- Black Bile: Stale foods: beans, soy, nuts, astringent foods, peanuts, rancid fats, nightshade vegetables - i.e. tomatoes, eggplant.
- Blood (most desirable humor): Spinach, green leafy vegetables, berries, and various types of meat in moderation cultivate it but excessive consumption may lead to make it too thick, acidic or even toxic.

Guidelines for eating in context with humors

Sensible eating is not about what we eat, but also how and when we eat:

1. Never eat when tired, angry or upset. Fatigue, negative emotions and stress impair proper digestion.
2. Don't eat unless truly hungry as the body isn't yet ready to receive the food.
3. Eat largest meal at midday. When the Sun is at its height, so as our powers of pepsis/digestion and metabolism.

4. Eat lightly for dinner; 2 - 3 hrs before sleep. Eating heavy, too late at night, will leave undigested food to putrefy in the gut and disturb sound sleep, as well as digestion.
5. A little light exercise before meals stimulates the appetite and digestion by consuming residual humoral superfluities.
6. Drink water b/w meals sip by sip. Drinking too much water dilutes the digestive juices while small amounts keep the food lubricated and ease swallowing.
7. Don't overeat nor fill the stomach past three quarters. Always leave some space for air, (at least one quarter).
8. Chew food well before swallowing. Digestion begins in the mouth, by grinding and mixing food with salivary juices.
9. Eat in good company; make meals a happy, joyful occasion. Melancholy can halt digestion.
10. Never eat on the run. Give food time to digest properly. i.e. Eat right bite by bite.

The notion of gourmet and gourmand in Greek philosophy is very interesting:

- Gourmet: Natural, wholesome, high quality, and exquisitely prepared food is savoured and cherished for its Taste and Nutritive Value, consequently limiting the temptation to overeat, and the appetite will automatically get balanced.
- Gourmand: Stuffing ravenously without cultivating awareness/pleasure or appreciating the food/flavor will lead to diet abuse/overeating.

This ancient way of thinking about health and special foods is carefully passed down the generations. These traditions still influence the way many people understand temperament in contemporary world; though not scientifically substantiated. Hence, there is no secret that Greeks were the precursors of modern health sciences.

Bottom line

Summarizing the relationship b/w FOOD and MOOD we can say that in eating patterns, moderation and common sense matters above all. It allows us to opt for constructive dietary choices and to instill the essence of wholesomeness and gastronomic virtues in everyday meals.

"We are what we eat".

Food defines our entire persona. So, we should focus on our Eating Habits as health is more dependent on Nutrition than on Medicine.

Stay focused to stay healthy.

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