

Spleen Qi Deficiency – A Nutritional Perspective

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Looking at nutrition from a Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) perspective offers new insights into our health concerns. In this article I explore one of the most common TCM pattern - Spleen Qi Deficiency.

Terms Defined

When we talk about the Spleen in TCM we use the capital 'S' to signify that we are not talking about the anatomical organ as in Western medicine. We are talking about a functional system that includes physical as well as emotional and mental processes. Qi is the life force that flows through living beings and it is the energy that enables each organ system to do its job. Spleen Qi Deficiency means that the life force of the Spleen is low, and it won't be able to perform its functions properly.

Physical Aspects of the Spleen

Digestion is a key function of the Spleen since it is responsible for transforming food into Qi and transporting it to the four limbs. When this doesn't happen a person feels tired. The Spleen keeps fluids within the channels. Overflows such as hemorrhages, edema or easy bruising are signs of a weakened Spleen. The Spleen also keeps the organs in their proper place so when you see clients with hernias or prolapses consider their Spleen. The Spleen governs the muscles - muscle-wasting or obesity may be due to Spleen Qi Deficiency. When the Spleen is deficient for a long time, it leads to dampness. Chronic fatigue, candida overgrowth, arthritis and fibromyalgia are often associated with people who have a pattern of Spleen Qi Deficiency.

The Spleen is easily damaged by excess damp and cold. Since the Spleen is an Earth element organ system, consider what happens to soil when there is too much water - it turns to mud, and things get stuck in the mud. Too much cold and earth congeals and again gets sticky. In the body we might see chronic sinus congestion, hyperlipidemia, or obesity as signs of this overly damp or cold earth element.

Psychological/Emotional Aspects

Feeling ungrounded, or having a floating or spacey sensation may be due to a weak Spleen. This is common when people travel, which often brings up digestive problems. Having a safe comfortable home situation, and a stable routine (especially around meals) strengthens the Spleen. I have often encountered clients in the process of moving homes who have more Spleen issues than usual.

Worry - that endless loop of repetitive thoughts - may be a sign of a Spleen imbalance. Chewing and chewing on the same piece of information over and over, without being able to swallow and digest it may also show the Spleen needs help. On the other hand good mental focus and the stamina for in-depth study is a sign of strong Spleen Qi.

Key Symptoms

- Fatigue
- Weakness in the arms and legs
- Bloating
- Edema
- Sallow complexion
- Loose stools
- Low appetite

With dampness:

- Heaviness in the four limbs
- Stuffy feeling in chest or epigastrium
- Nausea
- Brain fog

Tongue

When I ask my clients to show me their tongue, one of the things I am looking for is ‘scallops’ on the edges. A sign of Spleen Qi Deficiency is a swollen tongue with teeth indentations. I check my own tongue in the rear view mirror of my car when I’m stopped at a traffic light. If you see me sticking out my tongue, I’m really not trying to be rude, I’m assessing the state of my Spleen! I highly recommend examining your own tongue frequently to watch the changes.

Energetics of Food

In Chinese Dietetics, foods are analyzed and categorized on their energy. There are dampening/moistening foods, warming foods, cooling foods, and drying foods. Since the Spleen is weakened by cold and damp, the best choices for someone with a Spleen Qi Deficiency would include warming and drying foods. Mild seasonings and spices, enough to be interesting but more towards the bland side, work best for the Spleen.

Cold Foods

Raw foods are cooling. A body must heat a food to body temperature in order for the Spleen to extract the Qi from the food. If the Spleen is already deficient, eating raw food will take up precious energy that the body can’t afford. By the time the food is heated up, there is even less digestive power. Very few foods are eaten raw in Chinese cuisine. Partly this is from agricultural methods that make raw food more likely to carry parasites, but partly it is because of the wish to keep the Spleen strong. Raw foods are typically fermented before being eaten. Western diets include many salads. While it would be a shame to give up fresh greens, if the person has a large Spleen Qi deficiency, sticking to cooked vegetables would be a better choice.

Other common cold foods are drinks that come straight from the refrigerator, or drinks with ice. Imagine your Spleen Qi deficient client reaching for the refrigerated orange juice on a cold winter morning. Heating up some ginger tea would be much more appropriate! Other food suggestions would include soups and stews cooked for a long time, foods using warming spices such as ginger, cinnamon, black pepper, nutmeg, and touches of cayenne.

Nutritionists with a holistic bent often suggest booster foods such as algae because they offer a depleted person a rich supply of trace minerals and beta carotenes. From a TCM point of view, algae are grown in cold conditions and they may be considered too cooling for someone with Spleen Qi Deficiency. Chlorella is considered more of a neutral temperature, and the warmest of the algae, while spirulina is the coolest. If you suggest algae to a person with Spleen Qi deficiency, start with small amounts of chlorella and watch their Spleen.

Damp Foods

Dairy foods and grains with gluten are considered dampening. I knew an acupuncturist who referred to milk as ‘cow snot’. I think this is an unfair dismissal of such a nourishing food. Milk can be very nourishing and moistening, but it’s easy to go overboard with dairy products in our culture, and if a person has allergies or food intolerances, the dampening effect will be multiplied. Most adults of Chinese ancestry are lactose intolerant while dairy and wheat are more common in European, Middle Eastern and Indian diets. If there are no food sensitivities, these foods will have less of a dampening effect, but they are better used in small amounts.

Sugar and fat are other dietary sources of Dampness. These foods are often linked with excess weight, a sign of excess Dampness. Small amounts of natural sweeteners would be a great improvement over cookies, cakes, sodas and candies. Fried foods and hydrogenated oils are far

more dampening than the more healthful oils and fats from nuts, seeds, avocados, wild fish and grass-fed, free-range animals. Soy is dampening so avoid soy isolate powders, soy milk and fake lunch meats with soy protein isolate. Reduce tofu and tempeh to a few times a week rather than every day.

Triple Yin Death

The combination of dairy and sugar kept at a cold temperature makes ice-cream the classic 'bad' food for someone with Spleen Qi Deficiency. Since cold and damp are Yin characteristics, it gets the quaint name of 'Triple Yin Death'. If a client has dairy allergies, perhaps we could call ice-cream the Quadruple Yin Death for them. Asking a client to reduce or eliminate ice-cream would be a higher priority over other dampening or cooling foods such as tofu in miso soup, or even small salads.

Nourishing the Spleen

In a nutshell, create a food plan that is deeply nourishing while being easy to digest, and warm in temperature and energetics. A meal that feeds the Spleen leaves a person feeling well-satisfied. A person with a healthy Spleen feels content and relaxed with an excellent ability to focus on the matter at hand without becoming overwhelmed or confused.

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The Happy Spleen Diet

Breakfast ideas:

- Oatmeal cooked with pumpkin and sunflower seeds, a pinch of cinamon.
- Brown rice baked with almonds and raisins and cardomom
- Savory millet cereal cooked with onions, cilantro, topped with nutritional yeast.

Lunch & Dinner Ideas:

- Pumpkin or carrot soup
- Hummus (reduced tahini) on lightly steamed veggies or whole grain pita bread
- Lamb stew with onions, carrots, parsnips and mustard greens
- Steamed Brussels sprouts with broccoli rabe, brown rice and well-cooked beans
- Seafood stew with collard greens, kale and scallions

Beverages

- Ginger tea sweetened with stevia, or raw honey
- Fennel caraway tea
- Flax seed milk with cinnamon, nutmeg, cardamom
- Molasses (1 TBS) in hot water

Desserts (small portions served warm)

- Baked yam drizzled with maple syrup
- Stewed dried fruits (especially figs, cherries, peaches and dates) cooked with cinnamon and/or licorice sticks.

Recommended Reading

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