

Dietary Recommendations for Blood Deficiency

How well our bodies function depends on the kind of food we eat. Think about it for a minute. Say you eat pancakes for breakfast. They might taste good, but an hour later you notice you're hungry again. Consider how you feel a couple hours after a garden salad for lunch versus a chicken soup or stir fry. Ever notice how in the midst of summer fruit season, *things* tend to be a little... looser? Move a little more... quickly? We are often intuitively aware of these connections. However, our modern urban lives also tend to be characterized by chronic time and energy deficiency leading us toward the most convenient or inexpensive choices in the pastry window or close to the check out register.

Basic principles guiding a healthful relationship with food and eating are outlined in my article [Food as Medicine](#). In this article, I'm looking specifically at *blood deficiency*, a form of *malnourishment* which is actually very prevalent in our developed, industrialized, affluent corner of the world. I treat symptoms resulting from *blood deficiency* in my clinical practice everyday. Below, I've attempted to explain this Chinese medical concept in clear and accessible language so you might examine how it applies to you. I'll start with a basic metaphor I often use in describing how different foods impact the digestive system.

All food breaks down to fuel the basic functions of the body and mind. Some foods act like *kindling*, they burn quickly and get the *fire* going. But they don't last long. *Kindling* foods, the pancakes, refined sugars, grains and breads, most fruit and vegetables, all break down into pretty simple sugars. Other foods are like slow burning *briquettes*; they take a little longer to get started (digested), but they keep cooking for hours. These include beans and pulses, whole grains, tofu and tempeh, nuts and seeds, and all animal products.

In Chinese medicine, we're additionally concerned about how different foods nourish the blood. Our blood is like an irrigation system for the body. The flow and the nutrients in the *irrigation system* determine the health of our skin, eyes, nails, hair and internal organs. Well *irrigated* blood expresses itself in a brightness in the eyes, hair that is full and shiny, strong smooth nails, skin that is not excessively dry and flakey. But what we can see on the outside (hair, nails, skin), is also happening to our internal organs and tissues on the inside. When well *irrigated*, our muscles and organs remain moist, supple and vital. If our bodies are not *irrigated* with healthy, nutrient rich, *blood nourishing* foods, the opposite of those characteristics listed above begin to appear in our tissues, outside and inside of the body.

Animal protein is one of the easiest ways to nourish the blood. If you've limited eating animal protein intake for any period of your life, for financial, ethical, or spiritual reasons, you may well have experienced some of the symptoms attributable to *blood deficiency* noted below. Additionally, prolonged vegetarianism, insufficient protein consumption, or eating mostly



cold or raw foods can weaken the digestive system, compromising its ability to extract necessary nutrients from the food you eat. Although some patients who present as blood deficient can be anemic, *blood deficiency* is not necessarily synonymous with anemia.

Blood deficiency can commonly result in:

- Musculo-skeletal injuries that fail to heal. *This condition is common among young very athletically active women who have a history of being/are currently vegetarian, or eat limited protein.*
- Menstrual irregularities or absence of menstrual period.
- Insomnia.
- Blurred vision or other vision problems.
- Poor memory.
- Anxiety, depression and/or fatigue.
- Numbness in the extremities.
- Leg cramps, restless leg syndrome.
- Dry skin.

Additionally, *blood deficiency* can, but doesn't always generate *internal wind*. The Chinese medical concept of *internal wind* can be observed in symptoms such as itchy skin, eye twitching, dizziness, and leg cramps; all symptoms that move or stir within one's body like the wind. I have successfully treated patients who have suffered from *blood deficiency with internal wind* and experienced severe eye twitches, unrelenting whole body itching after working out, psoriasis, and restless leg syndrome. Depending on the severity of the symptoms and the underlying pathology, dietary supplementation may or may not be enough to resolve these symptoms. Regardless, nourishing the blood through a healthy diet is a good starting point for resolving symptoms and supporting optimum health.

Eating a variety of whole foods will intrinsically nourish the blood. The quantity of foods necessary to nourish or build the blood will vary depending on 1.) the severity of symptoms exhibited, as well as 2.) the strength of an individual's digestive system. Some blood nourishing foods are more difficult to digest and so must be consumed in moderation while a person's digestive system strengthens. When making dietary modification, while it is important to consider the most potent forms of blood nourishment, it is also imperative an individual makes choices that are sustainable, to their palate, spirit and wallet.



BLOOD NOURISHING FOODS

- Molasses
- Chicken
- All red meat (lamb, buffalo, pork, particularly bone, marrow and liver)
- Bone stock and soup
- Eggs
- Mackerel, tuna, anchovy, oysters, mussels, shrimp, prawns, clams, seaweeds
- Leafy green (kale, chard, spinach, collard greens)
- Beets
- Winter squash/pumpkin, sweet potatoes, carrots, corn, parsnips, yams, peas, onions, leeks, garlic, turnip, mushrooms (including oyster and shitake)
- Cooked whole grains
- Goji berries
- Stewed fruits, dates, figs, longan berries, grapes, cherries
- Legumes in general; especially chick peas, black, kidney, adzuki and fava beans
- Fresh ginger
- Black sesame seeds
- Rice syrup, barley malt and raw sugar cane
- Fermented soy products (tempeh, miso)
- Vegemite and marmite

After reviewing this list, consider if these foods have been a regular part of your diet in the past, and also how frequently your current diet incorporates these foods.

Part of the reason why examining diet is such an important part of my clinical practice is because of my own experiences with healing through food. I stopped eating meat when I was 19. Through my college studies and growing global consciousness, I became aware of how many more resources it took to produce a pound of beef compared to a pound of beans. It seemed irresponsible and unsustainable to consume so many resources. Reserving fish as a celebration food, I was vegetarian for 14 years. Through my personal and clinical experience, I have determined that it is essentially impossible, particularly living in the NW, for the body to get what it needs from a strict vegetarian diet. I returned to eating meat some years ago. It was difficult for me to come to this conclusion, but my own compromised health demanded it. As a consequence, I have tremendous empathy for those who have made similar choices for any period of their life. I bring my own life experiences, and the compassion born from those experiences, into the discussion of how to address symptoms arising from *blood deficiency*.



In my work with patients, supporting them to explore their relationship to how they nourish their body is often a critical piece in addressing health concerns. One of the first things I encourage is for people to simply notice what they eat and how they feel. Often the correlations are so striking, the patient returns the following week with observations and insights galore into their own digestive function, energy level, sleeping patterns and mood. What's wonderful is that this information doesn't come from the outside. It doesn't come from me as a health care provider, a magazine article or the web. This comes from a person's own body, their own experience. This *information* is right there for each one of us. However, we are often so engrossed in our lives or our symptoms that we fail to recognize the dots our bodies are begging us to connect.

Experiment with some of the suggestions in this article and simply observe changes in your body. Some changes may be immediate, other may arise more gradually. You, alone, can determine the types of changes you're willing to make and on what timeline. It is my utmost desire to support people in exploring how they eat, so they will feel both healthier and more empowered in relationship to how they nourish themselves. If any questions have arisen as you've read this article, give me a call or send me an email. I welcome your questions and curiosity.

For more information about other aspects of diet and health, read my article, [Food as Medicine](#) and [Avoiding Damp Accumulation through Food Choices](#) also available on the educational links page of my website amycdarling.com.

