

Ingredients for Good Health

Four basic ingredients for good health are Clean air to breathe, clean water to drink, good food to eat and adequate restful sleep.

Breathing

In Chinese Medicine the Lungs are linked with the skin. Through the breath the Lungs set the body's rhythm; a troubled Lung might trigger tightness in the chest, skin rashes, vulnerability to colds or flu, rigid thinking, or even melancholy. We talk about how the Lung opens to the nose and manifests in the body hair. Poor breathing can make for dry body surfaces. Breathing is an act of purification. We breathe in fresh oxygen, which purifies not just our lungs but our whole body, providing for the aerobic respiration of cells. This in turn is effective in nutrient integration including the burning of fats. This helps explain why even gentle exercise helps us to maintain good health.

We can breathe to relax: take deep slow breaths, which help us to focus in times of tension. We also take focused breaths to energize ourselves: that breath we take just before we make our entrance on stage.

There are all sorts of different breath techniques. Most people operate on shallow breaths, not using their full capacity. Are you using the back of your lungs? Or do you just pump up in the front of your chest? How about breathing from the diaphragm, as singers are trained to do? I was trained to use the back region of my lungs in order to get greater capacity for air to help with the strength to do leaps and overhead lifts in dance. This helps with endurance.

We can breathe through our nose or through our mouth while performing with a perennial smile. How about breathing through the third eye? You will find references to this in various meditations. Tai chi relates breath to the flow of qi through the body, allowing us to access energy and draw on our reserves. If we breathe deeply we can achieve other states of thought. It can calm us. (It can also make us spacey.)

Here in the Las Vegas desert it is very important to keep the lungs moist. Chinese medicine is about balance, not extremes. We need to balance the fierce dryness of the desert with our internal moisture.

Dryness causes chapping or cracking of mucus membranes. In my patients who smoke (which is extremely drying to the lungs) I have noticed that having a humidifier or a water fountain in their home helps not only with breathing but also to maintain moisture in the skin here in the scorching desert.

The scholar L.S. Jarrett writes that moisture helps the lungs and large intestines to draw quality into our being and discharge what has been metabolized and no longer serves. Remember that the word inspiration means to breathe in, and it is what defines our being alive. Let us use it to help the quality of our lives

Diet

Many people worry about their weight, either about keeping enough muscle on in order to do their job, or else about gaining so much weight that they lose their job. Whatever the case, most of them rarely seemed to regard food as a source of pleasure (except for maybe a guilty pleasure in comfort food?) Food is not just an indulgence; it is necessary for the body to maintain basic

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healthy functions and rebuild cell structures and tissues. In Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) food is considered basic medicine even before we use herbal formulas.

In Western medicine we think of the Digestive system as beginning with the salivary juices we secrete when we chew our food, which travels down the esophagus into the stomach, then is churned further in the small and large intestines. In Chinese Medicine we talk about the Spleen being in charge of the assimilation of food and fluids, as well as ideas; so when this function is disturbed, indigestion, bloating, scattered thinking, and poor concentration can ensue.

When do you eat? Do you skip breakfast when you wake up? Breakfast is important because it stokes the fire, gets us ready for the day. A surprisingly large number of the patients I see who want to lose weight, skip breakfast and start the day with coffee. Later on when hunger pains are out of balance, they will eat not what their body needs but what will satisfy their craving of the moment.

But Chinese Medicine teaches us that every twenty-four hours is divided into two-hour periods during which the *qi* (vital energy) travels through each of the twelve main Meridians (body Pathways). So if you are trying to lose weight, your body will have an easier time assimilating food if you eat before 7:00 pm. We all know that late night eating tends to tax your body when it needs to rest and replenish for the next day ahead.

What do you eat? I suggest a little bit of everything healthy and in moderation, rather than a fad diet, which may deprive you of essential nutrients. Keep it simple with foods that break down easily: a balance of lightly cooked vegetables, a little meat and grains. Stay away from overly processed foods and give your digestive system a break. Even Time magazine came out with a recent issue about how fast-food makes us fat.

Finally, focus on your meal, sit down and relax; don't eat on the run. How you eat is as important as what and when you eat.

Sleep

Another one of the main ingredients to good health is adequate rest. A healthy amount of sleep is 7-9 hours per night. If you sleep less than this, your *yang* is working overtime and you are likely to be using up some of your *jing*/ essence. If you sleep more than 9 hours it is more likely to be a sign of pathology than a need for sleep.

Daytime is the *yang* portion of the day. In ancient China, quite obviously, they didn't have casinos with entertainment, so after dark most people went to bed. However, Las Vegas is a city of nighttime entertainment, which means we are often doing a *yang* activity during the *yin* time-- which is after nightfall. Over time, this can deplete our bodies, so we must be sure to take adequate care of our bodies need to rest. Even Western medicine refers to nighttime as the time when the parasympathetic nervous system takes over and restores the wear & tear of the day's activity, replenishing our tired cells.

Insomnia refers to difficulty in sleeping or disturbed sleep patterns leaving perceptions of insufficient sleep. Do you sleep through the night? In Chinese medicine we differentiate between different kinds of insomnia. Do you have difficulty falling asleep, or do you have difficulty staying asleep? Are you restless, do you wake up often? Some people have difficulty waking up, and when they do, they do not feel rested. Each of these provides a clue to the pattern that every patient manifests in his or her individual way, and each can indicate different things. Some

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insomnia can be from an irregular diet, digestive problems or even excess hot greasy foods, which create heat.

In Oriental Medicine the Heart is the seat of consciousness, rather than the brain as in western medicine. The Heart requires Yin and blood to house the shen/spirit properly. If either or both of these are deficient, the shen becomes disturbed. If the shen is harmonious, the mind is calm and peaceful, and there is clear consciousness and mental activity. If the shen is disturbed, the mind is restless, with insomnia, confused thinking, poor memory, irritation, dream-disturbed sleep, even depression and anxiety. So lack of adequate sleep can cause not only emotional disturbances but also mental and physical disorders. This is why I recommend breathing, relaxation & meditation exercises along with acupuncture and herbs. Overthinking does not help you get to sleep.

I often hear patients tell me that they always get tired at a particular time of the day, for example at 3:00 in the afternoon, regardless of whether or not they had a heavy lunch. If you aren't getting enough sleep, a nap can be very restorative.

Give your body the rest that it needs for good health, so that your life is more joyful.

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