



WILD ROOTS

TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE
& ACUPUNCTURE CLINIC

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Foods for Liver Congestion and Stagnation

Qi stagnation is mostly associated with dysfunction of the liver. From a biomedical point of view, the liver is the detoxification factory of the body and all substances that enter the gastro-intestinal system initially pass through the liver. From the Chinese medical view point, the liver controls the smooth flow of qi in the body, both digestive and emotional.

With the ever increasing load of synthetic substances (preservatives, coloring agents, pharmaceuticals and so on) in the modern diet, the liver is often overloaded. Stress and depressed moods also impact liver function. These factors contribute to many of the symptoms we recognise in TCM as liver qi stagnation.

The liver can also be overloaded by the ingestion of too much food (overeating) or by eating too frequently and not allowing the digestive process to be completed before providing it with a new job. Even though the primary organ of digestion is the spleen, it is the liver that regulates the timing and distribution of resources to the spleen, so that it can function efficiently. By impairing or congesting the spleen, the liver will also become congested, but it is possible to have a stagnated liver that then impairs proper functioning of the spleen as well. These two organs work closely together.

Foods that are sour or heavy and hard to digest should be avoided with liver stagnation. However, foods which have a mild pungent, dispersing nature should be favoured.

Patients should eat less in each sitting, (leave the table feeling as though they could continue eating) and make sure they chew thoroughly. Taking the last meal in the late afternoon or early evening is also encouraged. Being overly emotional at meal times is especially detrimental as meals should be eaten in a calm and relaxed environment.

The emphasis of the diet should be towards vegetable matter, with plenty of green, yellow and red, implemented by the pungent, dispersing items noted above. Lightly spiced food, such as curries and Asian style dishes help circulate the qi. Carbohydrates and proteins should be secondary, together constituting less than half the diet as they can be harder to digest and congesting to the liver.

Foods and principles to follow:

In general, eat less, eat main meals earlier in the day, concentrate on light and mildly spiced foods; stir fry, poach and steam; high vegetable, low carbohydrate, low meat.

Mild dispersing, pungent flavours: spices, onions, garlic, mustard greens, watercress, turmeric, basil, mint, peppermint, horseradish, pepper, cardamom, cumin, fennel, dill, ginger, small quantities of grape or rice wine (red is best), coffee (1 per day); care with the warming foods when there is stagnant heat. Sour flavours (small amounts): citrus, vinegar, pickles, sour cherry and plums.

Eat plenty of fresh vegetables, some fruit, sprouted grains, asparagus, taro, cabbage, turnip, cauliflower, broccoli, brussel sprouts, beetroot, Jerusalem artichoke, sourdough rye bread, extra virgin olive oil, molasses, small amounts of high quality protein and fish.

Avoid:

Processed, junk or adulterated food, unnecessary drugs or intoxicants, eating when upset or under pressure, skipping meals, eating quickly, and overeating will all congest the liver leading to stagnation.

Food high in saturated fats and oils: cheese, eggs, cream, ice cream, red meats, lard, shortening, margarine, nuts, pizza, hot chips.

Excessively hot and pungent flavours: hot chillies and peppers, spirits.

Excessive cold or refrigerated food: ice cream, beer, salads and raw vegetable juices, white wine, artificial foods, refined and processed foods.

Avoid excessive consumption of stimulants such as caffeine, nicotine, and refined sugar.

Adapted From: Maclean, Will and Jane Lyttleton. (1998) Clinical Handbook of Internal Medicine. MacArthur, University of Western Sydney.