Dietotherapy: Background and theory

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Background

Food occupies a central place in our daily life. It supplies all essential nutrients necessary for our existence, and is the source of our physical and mental energy. Since the earliest times, people have been aware that a poor or unbalanced intake of food and drink can lead to the onset, progress or persistence of many common diseases. This was noted by Hippocrates, Galen and Ibn Sina, the original pioneers of Tibb. In fact, most chronic disorders of our time result in part from malnutrition in one form or another. Diabetes, obesity, heart disease, inflammatory diseases, some skin disorders and cancer can trace their origin back to poor or unwise consumption of food – too much salt or fat; too little fibre; not enough fruit and vegetables; bad eating habits, etc.

Many of the early observations have since been unequivocally confirmed by studies carried out by present-day medical research. For example, cancer is, in many if not most cases, linked to the type of food consumed by the person afflicted: specifically the nature of the fat and sugar consumed regularly, and in abnormally large amounts.

However, the other side of the coin, the use of diet to improve health, promote recovery from disease, and prevent disorders from developing is enjoying a revival of interest. Long accepted as one of the pillars of Lifestyle Factors in Tibb, this therapeutic approach is known as dietotherapy. Evidence is mounting that changes to a person’s diet is capable of reversing the progression of many chronic diseases, and this has lead to renewed interest in the technique. Again, Hippocrates thought of it first: "Let your food be your medicine, and medicine be your food." Instead of being an afterthought when treating a particular disorder, changes and improvement of diet is now being considered for a place at the forefront of therapy.

What is dietotherapy?

What is the difference between dietetics and dietotherapy?

Dietetics is the scientific study of nutrition, or the food and drink we consume – our diet – on a regular daily basis. The reverse, the study of how food, or particular components of it, can contribute to the long-term treatment of chronic ailments, is called dietotherapy.

In practice, dietotherapy involves encouraging a person with a chronic disorder, brought on by a faulty or imprudent personal lifestyle, to consciously adopt reasonable and realistic changes to his or her diet, in order to reverse the
Physis is the body’s intrinsic ability to heal itself from within, without outside help. It is our ‘inner doctor’. It is the body’s intrinsic ability to heal itself from within, without outside help. It is our ‘inner doctor’.

progress of the disorder. In Tibb, the aim of such dietary changes is to restore equilibrium or harmony to the qualities involved in the person’s temperament.

Dietotherapy is a major therapeutic option, along with cupping, herbal medication (or phytotherapy) and massage. As with all forms of treatment in Tibb, it respects Physis, the body’s innate capacity for self-healing: “the doctor within us all”. It is an approach to health maintenance and disease alleviation which is completely safe, and, if carried out properly, free from any adverse consequences. By supporting and enhancing Physis, it restores the person’s intrinsic harmony between the qualities. In most cases, the actual type of food or its nutritive value is not important; it is its ability to reverse the disordered qualities that have lead insidiously to the chronic ailment in the first place. The consumption of specific foods is encouraged, and the omission of deleterious foods discouraged.

**Tibb and the nature of food**

Food, whether meat, vegetables, fruit, grains, etc., is made up of five major components: proteins, carbohydrates, fats, minerals and water. Tibb has allocated different qualities to each of these components:

- **Proteins**: an overall quality of dryness, but with some degree of either heat or coldness, depending on the source of the protein.
- **Carbohydrates**: an overall quality of moistness, but with some degree of heat or coldness, also depending on the source of the carbohydrate.
- **Fats**: an overall quality of heat, with different degrees of moistness, and minimal amounts of dryness and coldness.
- **Minerals**: an overall quality of coldness and dryness.
- **Water**: an overall quality of moistness.

This means that over a period of time the person’s overall internal qualities are affected to a greater or lesser extent by the qualities of the food consumed. It also follows that if a person’s qualitative balance is disturbed to any substantial degree, then this can be reversed or corrected, and balance restored, by consuming food with certain qualities.

Tibb therefore considers that we are all affected by both the quantity of food consumed, but by the qualitative nature of the components it contains.

From the Tibb perspective, anything consumed regularly and deliberately by mouth can be divided into different categories. Each of these can affect a person’s health, positively or negatively.

- **Diet**
  The food we consume to provide routine nutrition and energy, and which are made up of the components identified above. When we take this, no real changes to the person occur, or are expected, apart from alleviation of hunger. The body extracts from the food what it can use and returns to the environment what it cannot use, together with any waste material or products of metabolism.

- **Herbs and spices**
  These are often added to food to make it more palatable or attractive, and at the same time their medicinal properties contribute towards improving a person’s general health. Onions, garlic, ginger and almonds fall into this category.
Tibb considers that most chronic diseases arise from an excess of Cold and Dry foods, aggravated by a lack of body heat.

Tibb has also classified different items of food into whether they are qualitatively heating or cooling, coupled to whether they are moist or dry. So there are specific foods which are heating, but with different levels of either dryness or moistness. Similarly, there are other foods which are cooling, but with either dryness of moistness.

In Tibb philosophy, the concept of the qualities of heating and cooling, moistness and dryness, is linked to the effect of different foods on the person’s bodily metabolism and formation of the humours. Heating foods will increase the body’s basic metabolic rate, and cooling foods will have the opposite effect. For some diseases, like rheumatic disorders, heating foods should be used. For other disorders, like hepatitis, cooling foods are more beneficial.

According to Tibb, heating foods and spices confer a number of benefits:

- They increase the production of digestive enzymes in the gut
- They help the body digest food efficiently
- They promote the assimilation of micro-nutrients (vitamins, co-factors, minerals) into the body
- They increase the metabolic rate in body cells

According to Tibb, most chronic diseases arise due to an excess of coldness and dryness, with corresponding loss of body heat.

**Tibb and dietotherapy**

A key pillar of Tibb philosophy is the concept of the *Lifestyle Factors*. These are the main determinants of our health *(see box)*. If a person develops a poor way of life, by adopting poor quality, aberrant behaviours, chronic diseases are
A major concept in Tibb is that of the **Lifestyle Factors**. These are personal behaviours which each of us are involved with on a daily basis. The major ones are:

- Environmental air and breathing
- Food and drink
- Sleep and wakefulness
- Movement and rest
- Emotional state
- Elimination of toxins

These have important influences on our state of health and disease.

Dietotherapy is aimed at restoring the person’s original harmony brought about by an unwise lifestyle. Its underlying role is to support Physis in its quest to restore inner healing. It is aware that a person’s age has to be taken into account when food and drink requirements are determined. An old person requires different food than a young one; a pregnant woman has different needs to a male athlete. Tibb provides diet advice for all age groups, and perhaps equally important, for people of different temperaments.

A factor of importance when eating is the environment in which it is carried out. Tibb accepts and advises that food should be eaten in clean, relaxed and congenial surroundings. This important activity should also be as free as possible from negative emotions like anger, anxiety and sorrow. It should not be eaten at unusual times, especially late at night. By doing so, the person will not be able to digest the food properly, and this can lead to indigestion in the short-term and irritable bowel syndrome over a longer period of time.

**Dietotherapy and temperament**

Temperament is an important feature of a person, which defines his or her uniqueness. In Tibb it is an indispensable characteristic, important in diagnosis and treatment. The man aspects are:

- Personality characteristics, including emotional features
- Personal habits regarding regular diet, sleeping patterns, physical exercise and rest
- Physiological characteristics, including age and gender, and the efficiency of excretion mechanisms
- Physical demeanour, appearance and bodily physique

All foods possess their own unique temperament, made up of a combination of qualities.

- **Protein**, a major component of a balanced diet, is predominantly **hot**, with the second quality being either dry or moist, depending on the particular food.
- **Fats** possess an overall quality of **heat** also, with different degrees of moistness, but little dryness and coldness.
- **Carbohydrates** are predominantly **moist**, with some being hot and others cold as the second quality. Dryness is least.
- **Minerals** or **electrolytes** are invariably **cold and dry**.
- **Water**, not unexpectedly, is predominantly **cold and moist**.

This division of different foods according to temperament and qualities is important for dietotherapy. If a disease is characterised by having certain qualities which have brought disharmony to the person, then treatment generally aims...
to restore harmony by counteracting the imbalance in qualities. For example, a disorder like acne, which is an imbalance in the Dry and Hot qualities, is treated in dietotherapy by foods which have moistness and coldness as their primary qualities. Likewise, sinusitis, which is usually a Cold and Moist condition, will respond more to foods which are hot and dry qualitatively. The planning of a suitable diet for someone with a particular ailment therefore requires (a) identifying the qualities linked to the ailment, and (b) consuming food which redress the balance in qualities.

The table below* summarises a number of common foods and their particular temperament (qualities):

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Temperament (Qualities)</th>
<th>Typical foods</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hot and Moist</td>
<td>Liver, mutton, turkey, ginger, olives, bananas, mangos, peaches, almonds, wheat products, rye, cheese, sunflower oil, pepper, turmeric, green tea, honey, chocolate, licorice, most cereals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cold and Moist</td>
<td>Duck, rabbit, cucumber, butternut, pears, figs, melons, apples, cranberries, rice, semolina, corn flour, milk and its products (butter, custard, shakes), coriander, cumin, vanilla, rose syrup,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hot and Dry</td>
<td>Chicken, shellfish, game birds, red/green peppers, oily fish, garlic, onions, grapes, mustard, cashew and pecan nuts, eggs, cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg, chillies, peri-peri, garlic, alcohol.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cold and Dry</td>
<td>Beef, biltong, white fish, pork, cabbage, cauliflower, tomatoes, sweet potatoes, mielie, mushrooms, citrus fruits, avocados, peanuts, beans, samp, yogurt, basil, prunes, black tea, coffee, vinegar.</td>
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(*) A more detailed list of foods and their qualities is available from the Tibb Institute.

**Dietotherapy and maintaining good health**

Tibb advises that a person should try to eat according to his or her temperament. In this way, Physis is supported, and the risk of developing a chronic disorder of Lifestyle is reduced.

- Someone with a predominantly **sanguinous** temperament should go for cold and dry foods which do not increase the Hot and Moist qualities. A diet with balanced or equal amounts of protein, fruit and vegetables salads should be selected.
- If a person is predominantly **phlegmatic** in nature, then food with Hot and Dry qualities should favour high-fibre fruit and high-protein items like chicken, eggs, sea-foods and liver. Onion and garlic intake should be increased, an herbs like fenugreek, saffron and cloves. should be taken. Fluid intake should be relatively greater than average. Two main meals daily, separated by several hours, should be adopted.
- Health maintenance in the **bilious** temperament is supported by a Cold and Moist diet rich in fruit (e.g., pear, fig, watermelon, litchi, citrus) and vegetables (cucumber, lettuce), with less than usual heavy red meats. Water intake should be higher than average. Milk drinks are also fine, as are spices like coriander and cardamom.
- The person with a predominantly **melancholic** temperament should opt for a diet which is rich in Hot and Moist foods. Fruits like mangoes, peaches and bananas should be favoured, together with milk, cheese and honey, and meats like lamb, mutton and liver. Ginger is a beneficial herb to take regularly, and salt is fine.
Summary

Tibb places great emphasis upon the nature of the foods and drink we consume, and the environment where people eat. It considers that most ailments arise primarily from long-term errors in the person’s nutrition and eating practice. The rationale for dietotherapy is that disorders brought about by a faulty diet can be reversed by changes to this diet. In practice, dietotherapy involves a programme of dietary modification in order to address the underlying disequilibrium in temperament. It aims to support Physis in reversing deleterious changes, and restoring inner harmony by judicious advice to the person on the type and amount of food, and their qualities, in the light of his or her temperament. Tibb recommends different foods for consumption or avoidance to deal with the clinical disorder presently affecting the person. The consumption of specific foods is encouraged, and the omission of deleterious foods discouraged. The digestive process itself - digestion, assimilation and residue expulsion - also comes under scrutiny.

Further reading

“Cooking for your body type – everyday meals to suit your temperament”. Vallee N & Bhikha R.

“4 Temperaments; 6 Lifestyle Factors” Dr Rashid Bhikha


The four humors: Agents of metabolism. Online at: http://www.greekmedicine.net/b_p/Four_Humors.html