

THE ART OF LOSING WEIGHT: A PERSPECTIVE FROM CHINESE MEDICINE'S DIETARY BRANCH

By Andrew Serman

Something is going wrong for millions of people. Despite personal discomfort, social shaming, doctors' advice, enormous personal effort, and the 70 billion dollar diet industry, modern people are getting heavier and genuine weight loss too often remains elusive. Obesity rates have jumped by 10% in the last 15 years alone; in that same time extreme obesity has doubled. Something is going on, and the community of Chinese medicine practitioners should be ready to help with a variety of treatments, including well-thought dietary counsel expressed in easy-to-understand language.

The Importance of Individual Assessment/Diagnosis

It's tempting to generalize about weight loss, metabolism, diet, and so forth, but as always, a genuine differential diagnosis is needed. The central tenet of Chinese medicine is the radical individuality of each person. We may think a patient's presentation is unremarkable, only to be amazed again and again at what we actually find through an open-minded, creatively alert diagnosis process. With something as complex as weight management, even if cases seem similar, the effective entry key for different patients can be remarkably different. We honor the humanity of our patients by expecting to be surprised.

The Calorie Model Is Simplistic and Misleading

For years we have been conditioned into accepting an oversimplified calorie model along with its corollary: "People who are overweight just eat too much, it's their own fault." Not only is this negative, it is inaccurate and misleading. The calorie model presumes two bedrock errors: first, that different food types with equal calories are handled similarly by the body; second, that all calories eaten are absorbed. These two ideas are easily understood to be mistaken, and yet, many still defend the basic caloric model that sees the body as a machine somewhat akin to an automobile that takes in a quantifiable amount of fuel and must produce an equal amount of energy.

Each food has a somewhat different energetic effect (or response) after we eat it. Further, even different parts of the same food show differences, as do same foods grown in different seasons and under differing farm conditions. Cooking methods dramatically compound energetic differences, even after accounting for the oils used. And while eating less is a part of establishing a new weight "set point," our food choices are more important for making any change possible.

Excess weight is not a solo situation; it is a risk factor for many serious illnesses. As weight increases, so does immune weakness, hormonal imbalance, metabolic shifts (or metabolic illness), and cardiovascular concerns. This all occurs in the context of nuanced private emotional settings that hold the human side of each individual's path. In the midst of this complexity, what people want is often overly simple: "I just want to lose some weight, well, a lot, actually, but please don't ask me to change my lifestyle very much...."

Western culture is characterized by the mindset of specialization

while largely ignoring the complex interconnectedness of health matters. So often people dieting to lose weight damage other parts of their health (sometimes severely). Some may want only to be thinner through one diet plan or another, but on-again, off-again dieting damages metabolism. Sensing the loss of food, the body switches into famine mode, slowing metabolism, adjusting to preserve existing fat stores in response to deprivation. This is a recipe for failure, frustration, and negative self-judgment. We are interested in sustainable, sensible health, with great tasting foods that bring new messages to the body to signal real change.

What follows are general dietary suggestions to be applied skillfully, either in a patient-clinician context or by individuals seeking change on their own.

Establish Meal Rhythm

Two aspects of health that respond well to regular timing are digestion and sleep. To begin healing digestion, avoid erratic eating times. Skipping meals leads to overeating later. Allowing blood sugar levels to drop too far is taxing for the brain (which relies entirely on glucose in the blood for energy). Low blood sugar stimulates brain-generated urgent hunger, a craving for anything that is quick and can raise blood sugar. Since these cravings are so challenging to resist, it is better to avoid these situations. Bring more regularity to eating times, even if eating very small meals—for example, eat something even if you are not hungry in the morning.

Another very important point on meal timing is to stop eating late at night or just before sleep. One client who successfully lost substantial weight and stabilized into a new shape, did so by following only two dietary rules: eat no gluten (pasta, bread, etc.) and never, ever eat after 8pm. Meal timing matters.

Eat Satisfying Meals

There are countless fad diets that prey on people's frustrations and desire for quick fixes. Some include interesting ideas but suffer from tunnel-vision. One example is the no-carb trend, which fails to sufficiently differentiate refined sugar, glutinous grains, and non-glutinous grains (the carbs from gluten-free, whole grains are the safest for most people).

Sustainable diets are well-rounded and satisfying. Eat good quality fats, protein, and carbs to avoid craving bad fats and carbs. The difference is significant. Real food is satisfying; low calorie, low fat foods are not.

To be simple, eat satisfying meals not only to avoid cravings and binges, but to nourish and energize all the various aspects of digestion, organ functions, and internal health resources. If the organs of digestion are themselves nourished, they can fully transform food and clear the waste. These are key principles in weight maintenance.

Leave Room In Your Stomach, Then Pause

The stomach stretches; it doesn't fill like a glass jar that remains one size whether full or empty. But, it's a very useful thinking tool to say, "Fill the stomach only two-thirds full, leave the upper third

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empty.” Much more than a point of discipline, there are two crucial health points here:

Leaving room instead of eating until full allows the descension of breath, essential for supporting the digestive flame that is necessary for properly digesting food. When the digestive flame is low, food digests too slowly, can stagnate and ferment, with serious consequences including weight gain and inflammation.

We may not feel full “leaving 1/3 room empty,” but satiation is complex, involving nearly a dozen hormones that normally work in exquisite synchrony to signal that we’ve had enough to eat. These hormones (including insulin, cortisol, leptin, estrogen, ghrelin, glucagon-like peptide 1, neuropeptide Y, etc.) are sensitive to what we’ve eaten and how it is digesting. If response of these factors is slow, we easily overeat, before receiving the hormonal response that we’ve had enough.

Introduce the “Pause”

Leaving the stomach only 2/3 full isn’t meant to be punishment, or even conventional dieting. The idea is to digest better and leave enough time for your blood to respond to what you’ve eaten. Then, after about 30 minutes, if you really are hungry and the food is appropriate for your specific health, have some more. Technically, it’s a question of leaving time for the hormonal responses to kick in, but experientially it can be called “waiting for the food to land.”

Introducing a pause before going for more food (and certainly before any dessert) is a simple and powerful tool to avoid overeating. This is a method to break the habit of overeating using skill, not just self-control (with the associated feelings of will power failure). It’s an easy challenge that can give you a very welcome “win,” since, after all, if you truly remain hungry after pausing, you can then eat more (set a timer at first). During the pause we break the pattern of habitual overeating. We have time to notice the food “land” as our satiety hormones kick in. For a number of clients in my practice focusing on weight loss, the pause has been the main method used to successfully reach a new set point and feel renewed.

Eat Clear Meals

One of the underlying mechanisms behind weight gain is food stagnation. Foods stagnate when we eat what we can’t digest well; when we eat foods that don’t combine well (are difficult to digest together), or when we simply eat too much. Foods also stagnate if we eat on top of food that has not yet digested fully. We want to be hungry before eating, and we want to eat meals that we, individually, can digest well and in a timely manner. This is the definition of a clear meal. The practice varies dramatically between individuals.

The principles of clear meals are summarized here (see *Welcoming Food: Diet as Medicine for Home Cooks and Other Healers* for a fuller discussion):

A clear meal is nourishing and digests fully within 2-6 hours.

If food stagnation is present, begin meals with a true appetizer: carrots, olives, radishes, soups, fermented foods, or a genuinely small taste of wine (1-2 ounces).

Avoid cold foods, eat nearly everything cooked, because the stomach only works well when it is warm and moist, cooked foods aid digestion.

If needed, resolve chronic constipation with whole grains, nuts and

seeds, root vegetables, certain fruits (apples, pears, figs, prunes), beans, plenty of green vegetables, and adopt a habit of drinking warm water first thing in the morning. Food stagnation occurs if chronic constipation is present, as peristalsis slows down and prevents forward passage.

For those who digest complex meals poorly, separating proteins from carbs strongly strengthens digestion. Carbs and proteins digest with very different secretions; separating them allows digestion to focus on a simpler task. Green vegetables digest well with proteins or carbs. Have dairy alone, if at all. (Milk’s natural use is for calves to double their size in six months.)

Avoid sugar. Sugar impairs digestion of real food by providing easy blood sugar without the need to digest complex carbohydrates, proteins, or lipids.

Kitchen herbs and spices have a very important role to play. Many people see spices as just a way to make food taste good, but what’s important is the way spices can strongly aid digestion of the foods with which they are traditionally paired.

Consciously Include More Fiber

Modern diets—including both fast food and high cuisine—are dramatically low in fiber. Fiber feels satisfying; it is more filling than similar amounts of refined foods. It also feeds a healthy microbiome in the gut, aids peristalsis, and clears constipation. Problems with the gut microbiome often precede (or at least accompany) weight gain and obesity. Poor microbial colonization interferes with secretion of some hormones involved with satiety, leading to cravings. Restoring healthy gut microbes is one of the most powerful things we can do to regulate metabolism and hunger levels.

Foods that contribute good types of dietary fiber include oats, brown rice, millet, carrots, sweet potato, green vegetables, nuts, seeds, and beans. Foods that don’t provide fiber include bread, pasta, white rice, processed foods, meats, fish, poultry, eggs, and dairy.

Understand the Concept of Dampness

Being overweight can often mean that dampness is accumulating rather than ordinary weight, leading not just to heaviness but to a combination of lethargy, cravings, a sense of being emotionally overwhelmed, and even difficulties concentrating. Dampness is a term in Chinese medicine that refers to a wide variety of fluid stagnation issues ranging from water-weight and edema, to swellings anywhere in the body (internal or external). Dampness results from weakness in digestion and contributes to problems of cognition and awareness including blurry vision, sinus problems, hearing loss, and what is commonly described as brain fog.

Clearing dampness is central to the process of establishing a healthy weight set-point. [See Golden Flower Newsletter 2018 for a fuller discussion in my article, Diet and Dampness.] There are four points important to understand:

Dampness can arise from excesses or from deficiencies. As the body senses a deficiency of healthy yin resources (blood, hormones, healthy fluids), we tend to hoard any version of yin available, often craving fried foods, cheese, and sugar. Weight gain becomes a surrogate for healthy yin reserves. The strategy forward is to provide plenty of good oils such as olive oil, butter, oily fish, eggs, nuts, etc., increase fluids, soups, and stews, then begin clearing the excess that arose from old eating patterns.

Dampness also arises in response to internal heat as the body attempts to protect from inflammation through accruing damp. Eat soups and wet-cooked dishes that are made to digest easily, along with significantly increasing green vegetables for their ability to clear inflammation.

Dampness arises when our kidney yang qi is low; in other words, when we are run down and our deep “batteries” aren’t strong enough to spark good digestion. We fall behind, which leaves us lower in energy than we were before, and we intuitively try to repair by eating more. But, lacking energy to digest our food well (see clear meals above), we fall ever more behind. This is an amplifying loop of cravings and weight gain. The way forward is to implement the recommendations above while finding ways to rest more, when possible.

Dampness can arise as a kind of psychological protection (for some the central mechanism in weight gain). It is important to nourish healthy yin before asking anyone to shed what is unconsciously built as a survival-level layer of protection.

In general, the path to clearing dampness starts with avoiding foods that very easily add to dampness (sugar, dairy, gluten, fried foods, alcohol, overeating). Then, include foods that actively help the body clear dampness (steamed leafy green vegetables, string beans and snow peas, spices such as oregano, cumin, coriander, dill, etc.) Be sure to include mushrooms, sprouts, naturally fermented foods, and grains such as wild rice, buckwheat, barley, millet, quinoa, amaranth, and job’s tears.

Have Healthy Snacks

Many people love to snack. Snacking isn’t good or bad in itself. However, many people become nervous when their hands are far from food. The need to snack should be explored for issues of blood sugar problems that need to be addressed, or issues of habit that need to be awakened. When we do snack, our snacks should contribute to our overall dietary strategies.

Good snacks should include fiber and be low in sugar. For example, snacking on olives, carrots, artichoke hearts and perhaps some cured meats. Almonds and dried figs can be an excellent snack that clears food stagnation and aids peristalsis. Low-sugar granola is also a clearing snack, and for a small meal, a bowl of muesli with yogurt is satisfying and healthy for most people (try a nut-milk in place of yogurt if you are dairy-free). Adding berries will help build blood so that emotional neediness becomes less urgent.

Meals and snacks both should be avoided unless actually hungry.

Avoid Processed Carbohydrates and Hidden Sugar

Much has been written about the dangers of carbs, but it’s not rice, millet, barley, or antique wheat such as spelt that are causing modern health problems, it is the processed grains, poorly grown and made unrecognizable in processed food, along with huge amounts of hidden sugar, food industry chemicals, and preservatives. To lose weight, avoid packaged foods. The decision to eat carbs or avoid them until metabolically healthier should be made on an individual case basis. When you do eat carbs, the best way is when you can see the individual grains, not processed or hidden. For most people, non-glutinous, unprocessed grains actively tune digestion and make it stronger, enabling the cultivation of one’s natural weight balance to develop.

Avoid Irritants to Digestion

Many very popular foods and drinks act as irritants to digestion. When irritated, two things happen: our stomachs complain in a way that feels like hunger, and our bodies produce dampness to soothe the irritation. Very common foods that irritate digestion include hot spices such as chili peppers of all types, garlic, onions, coffee, alcohol, modern wheat, and for many, tomatoes.

Identify and Avoid Foods You Don’t Tolerate Well

It’s very important to identify foods that you may be sensitive to, allergic to, or to which you have an intolerance. Avoiding foods that set off negative reactions in our digestion is crucial for calming inflammation and clearing the dampness that responds. In time, many (not always all) of these food sensitivities can fade, at which point they may be reintroduced, one at a time, with moderation.

The Shortest Note Ever on Foods and Metabolic Weakness

Obesity and metabolic illness are not identical but are closely linked. We have been taught that oils make us fat and salt gives us heart disease, but oils don’t stimulate insulin and damage the hormonal system, nor is normal use of salt dangerous. Hormonal disturbance and systemic inflammation are caused primarily by excess sugar. Sugar disrupts digestion and disorganized digestion disrupts metabolism. Do the work to absorb these truths, supported equally by Western and Chinese medicine.

Avoid Fake Foods, Including Low-Fat Processed Foods and Artificial Sweeteners

Artificial sweeteners (including non-caloric plant sweeteners such as stevia) signal that sweetness is coming and confuse digestion when it doesn’t arrive. Taste is the central signal for digestion in the body. Many studies show weight gain and raised risk of diabetes resulting from artificial sugars, and modern endocrinologists have begun recommending avoiding fake sugars. To include the sweet taste, have sweet potatoes, steamed grains, and butternut squash. After about two weeks, your sense of sweet will recalibrate to real foods. Many clients report being shocked when tasting an old favorite sweet they used to have daily; their tastes have recalibrated.

Similarly, low-fat dairy products set up an expectation of fats that do not arrive. The body, frustrated, will speak to you with hunger sensations, a vague empty feeling, and cravings. Further, the fat removed to make a product “low fat” is replaced with highly processed carbohydrates and thickeners. Have real foods with their natural fats; the body knows how to digest these well. Oils and fats do not contribute to metabolic disease. (The cause is primarily sugar and processed foods.) At the same time, choose quality oils; avoid damaged, overheated, cheap oils used for deep-frying that stress gallbladder and liver function.

The Heart of the Matter

Weight gain and associated health ills sit at the crossroads of industrial food production and a culture filled with profound personal stressors. Working with individuals, we must consider emotions, habits, histories, and their complete social and personal context. Profit-driven food providers cannot be relied on to have our health in mind, and unfortunately, nor can the for-profit medical complex (which sees the epidemic rise in metabolic disease as a “growth platform,” at least on the business level). No one is poised to support our health better than ourselves.

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The way forward is to make real changes in our own food selection and cooking, based on simple principles of how our bodies truly digest our meals from both energetic and material points of view. Making these changes opens the door to seeing life itself in a new way. May we never go back.

Food Choices and Recipes

While the inner energetics of wellness and healing can be extremely complex, most people can benefit greatly from the simple approach outlined above: eat real foods that the body knows how to digest; have personal clear meals; eat until only 2/3 full and leave a pause before eating more; have positive snacks; avoid irritants and fake foods; wake to the problems of sugar and refined carbohydrates so that eating well is not an experience of white-knuckle discipline but an act of motivation based on experience and understanding.

But with all this in mind, what is there to eat?

Plenty of great food that is moderately priced, easy to cook, and very satisfying. Below are general suggestions for grains, vegetables, animal foods, and a few more things. Make balanced meals that suit your (new) taste and digestion by mixing and matching a grain with a protein and some greens. Separate proteins and carbs, if appropriate, at least for one very clear meal per day.

Grains	Protein	Vegetables	Other
Buckwheat (kasha)	Fish, including salmon and white flesh fish	Kale, cabbage, bok choy, collards, chard, Napa cabbage, Brussels sprouts	Mushrooms
Wild Rice	Lentils	Broccoli, broccoli rabe, Chinese broccoli	Olives, artichokes
Brown Rice	Black or adzuki beans, etc.	Zucchini, summer squash, okra	Seaweeds
Long-grain White Rice	Chicken	Asparagus, radicchio, endive, dandelion greens, chicory greens	Chia seeds
Oats	Beef, Pork, Lamb	String beans, snow peas, sugar snap peas	Hemp nut seeds
Black or Red Rice	Eggs	Carrots, daikon, parsnips, turnips, rutabaga, radishes	Almonds, walnuts, pine nuts, chestnuts
Barley (best in soups)	Tofu	Sweet potatoes, butternut squash, acorn squash, other winter gourds.	Pumpkin seeds, sunflower seeds, sesame seeds
Rye (as in crackers)	Clams, mussels, scallops, oysters	Sprouts, pea shoots	Muesli/granola (home-made is easy and superior)
Job's Tears (aka Chinese barley, helps drain dampness)	Duck	Warming spices (not hot spices)	Nut or seed milk

Sample Recipe:

Buckwheat, Wild Rice, Red Lentils, and Kale

Ingredients

wild rice | 1/2 cup
 buckwheat | 1 cup
 red lentils | 1 cup
 kale | 2 bunches
 scallions | 3, slivered
 extra virgin olive oil | enough to coat lightly
 sea salt | chef's pinch
 spices | choose several (but not all) from the following: fennel seed, cumin, cardamom, oregano, thyme, nigella seed, grain of paradise, fresh ginger (slivered), ground turmeric

Directions

Wild rice strongly aids clearing, being particularly helpful for digestive stagnation. Rinse the wild rice then soak it in 1.5 cups boiled water overnight in a bowl wrapped in towels to stay warm longer (or use a large thermos). This method is called blooming the wild rice. After 6-8 hours it is ready to eat. Alternately, steam for 45 minutes. Wild rice is usually combined with other grains, here, with buckwheat.

Buckwheat is a non-glutinous grain that is not related to wheat. Purchase whole kernel buckwheat that has been toasted. Buckwheat does not need to be rinsed prior to cooking. Begin by dry-roasting in a dry pan over medium-high heat for a few minutes (to add warming yang qi that will aid digestion and promote internal movement). Steam the toasted buckwheat like you would rice: 1.5 cups water to 1 cup grain. Bring to a boil, then reduce to a simmer and cover tightly; do not stir or disturb. Steam for 15-18 minutes; turn off heat. Allow to rest 5-10 minutes, covered, before proceeding.

Lentils are high in protein and fiber. Red lentils are a special type of brown lentil with the outside removed to reveal the red-orange interior, and therefore they provide less fiber. For the same reason, they cook very quickly. Sort the lentils on a white plate background, remove any stray matter. Rinse quickly, then add to a pot. Add just enough olive oil to coat each lentil lightly, then boil with 1.5 cups water. The cook can decide whether to catch the red lentils just as they are soft but not mushy, or allow them to cook fully soft. Both ways are good; either way, after cooking, add a pinch of good quality salt and another splash of olive oil.

Kale is a trendy green vegetable that deserves much of the attention it receives. Kale aids digestion through its descending directional energy, the way it helps move fluids and eases any digestion pain, and of course for the nutrients it offers. Rinse the kale, strip leaves from stems (use stems in stock, but not this dish), cut or tear the leaves into bite sizes, then steam in a very shallow amount of water, covered, until lightly cooked, about 5-8 minutes. Drain residual water (into your stock pot or into the grains that are now ready). Coat the kale with olive oil and a pinch of sea salt, stir to mix evenly.

In a large pan, add a splash of olive oil, the slivered scallions, and your selected spices. After allowing the spices to warm and season the oil (about 1 minute over medium-high heat), add the cooked wild rice and the cooked buckwheat. Stir to combine. Taste for salt; adjust if needed.

Serve with generous scoops of red lentils and kale.

This vegan meal contains healthy carbs, protein, and greens, along with spices and scallion to ensure movement and aid digestion. If desired, reduce portion size somewhat and add a piece of steamed salmon, grilled chicken, or lightly seared slices of beef.

Andrew Sterman is the author of the two-volume: *Welcoming Food, Diet as Medicine for the Home Cook and Other Healers*. Both books are available for sale at www.gfcherbs.com. Visit Andrew at andrewsterman.com/food