HEALTH

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TCM: take the chill out

For the past two years, I have been eating a lot of cooling foods and drinking chrysanthemum tea in summer – perhaps too much – and eating green bean soup and other cooling drinks and foods. I believe you can make your stomach too cold and therefore very sensitive. What can one do to strengthen the stomach and spleen?

The cooling foods may contribute to your sensitive stomach, but your problem may also result from improper eating habits, stress or an underlying problem. If your condition persists, get a thorough physical check-up to be sure there is nothing more serious.

The stomach is a hollow muscular organ in which ingested food is stored. It secretes gastric juices to churn the food and slowly empties the contents into the small intestine. Once food enters the mouth, it triggers the brain to send messages to stimulate gland secretions and prepare the stomach for receiving food. This process is reactive to negative emotions and stress, whereby the stomach works longer than normal and at a lower level of efficiency. Other habits such as watching television, reading books or arguing during meals may do harm too.

These can impair the stomach's ability to accept and digest food. A collection of symptoms including pain or burning in the upper belly, nausea, bloating and belching will occur when you eat too much, too fast or foods your stomach doesn't agree with.

TCM treatment for a sensitive stomach is not simply to strengthen it or the spleen, but to eliminate accumulated pathogenic factors that caused the weakness in the first place. Physicians design the remedy according to symptoms and their degree of severity.

Bloating or fullness is caused by chi stagnation and herbs such as immature bitter orange, magnolia bark and costus root are used for smoothing the chi flow in the stomach.

Burning in the upper belly – a thirst that is only quenched by cool drinks – and a yellow tongue coating indicate the stomach has accumulated heat; herbs such as Chinese rhubarb, golden thread rhizome and forsythia capsule can cool this.

Foul smelling belching, nausea, no appetite and a thick tongue coating indicate that the food has remained in the stomach for too long. Herbs such as hawthorn fruit, medicated leaven and radish seed can aid the stomach in breaking down and emptying.

Serious bloating that affects the whole abdomen – also with tightness in the chest, heaviness of the head and limbs, nausea or vomiting and a bulky tongue covered by a white greasy coating – is due to excessive dampness and phlegm, and should be relieved by atractylodes rhizome, pinellia tuber and poria herbs.

The symptoms are likely to worsen with stress or emotional distress, which then affects the liver. Nutgrass rhizome, Sichuan lovage and gardenia fruit are therefore needed.

When indigestion is continuous, pressing or warming the upper belly seems to ease the discomfort. If you also have loose bowels, poor appetite and general fatigue, then spleen deficiency may have developed. Herbs such as astragalus root, largehead atractylodes rhizome and bugbane rhizome can strengthen the spleen and support the stomach.

Healthy lifestyle choices are crucial to healing a sensitive stomach. In addition to avoiding offending foods, you should eat small meals at regular intervals, eat slowly and chew thoroughly.

Since cooling foods have been identified as your trigger, you are advised to eat warming foods, such as ginger (left), pepper and mutton. Soups made with ingredients such as yams, lotus seed (below), euryale seed, rice and egg white can protect your digestive lining.

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