

[IMAGE]

When East Meets West

By Stephanie Pina, NMD

Eastern medical philosophy emphasizes the need for balance and harmony in the body in order to maintain health in all aspects of life. One of the most well-known medical texts from China, the *Nei Jing Su Wen* (*Yellow Emperor's Classic of Medicine*), written around 200 B.C., stresses this importance. It speaks not only about the practice of acupuncture and herbal medicine, but also the influence of diet, lifestyle, exercise and meditation as a means to maintain health and prevent illness.

Emphasis on these areas of health is an aspect of preventative medicine that is underutilized in the Western medical system. Health becomes more than the absence of disease or illness; it is the body's ability to preserve a balanced relationship with itself and the outside world. This is a different kind of medicine than most of us are used to, since Western medicine relies on treating illness, removing the organisms that make us sick with medications, and surgically removing what is not normal.

In Eastern medical philosophy, the concept of health can be simplified into the principle of keeping the five main organs - the spleen, heart, kidneys, lungs and liver - in balance. These five organs work together with other systems in the body to fulfill their physiological functions, but also perform other specially designated functions. Each of the five organs interacts with the others and is associated with certain colors, seasons, flavors and elements (fire, water, air, metal and wood). Here is an explanation of what each of these organs does and how you can help keep them in balance.

Basic Steps to Balance the Five Major Organs

- Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark *Diet - Focusing on the spleen and digestion:* The spleen, which is in charge of digestion, doesn't like cold, damp food since it's harder for the body to assimilate. Often, people with diets of only raw foods, high in dairy products and greasy meats, have trouble with digestion. This can lead to gas, bloating, gastric reflux and inconsistent bowels. The spleen is the Earth element that likes to be nourished with warming foods, which explains why comfort food that is simple, warm and easy to prepare (like chicken soup) can make us feel better.

To help strengthen the spleen, eat meals that are bland and combine a variety of different foods. Warming foods by stir-frying, lightly grilling or steaming can make even raw foods easier to digest. I use sushi as a perfect example of the idea of balanced eating. By itself, cold, raw fish and sticky rice are tough on the stomach, so sushi is served with warm tea, wasabi or horseradish, soy sauce, and ginger to help warm things up. Eating balanced, moderate-size meals that include the five flavors (salty, spicy, bitter, sour and sweet) also benefits the spleen. Always try to eat something for breakfast to kick-start your metabolism for the rest of the day, and try to eat at regular times throughout the day.

Emotions - Focusing on the heart and mental functions: The heart not only provides the pumping force behind moving the blood in the body, but also guides the emotions. When we experience separation, we have heartbreak; when we experience extreme happiness, our heart leaps with joy. The heart represents the fire element that, like our emotions, can burn brightly or barely flicker. The balance between the five emotions (joy, grief, worry, fear and anger) can be reflected in our physical state with palpitations and rapid heartbeat, but it also can affect our ability to think clearly and sleep.

- Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark The emotional component of illness often is overlooked in Western medicine. Patients who suffer from depression and sadness often recover slower from illness and trauma compared to those who feel supported and loved. Balancing your emotions to help maintain health might be as easy as expressing what you feel in writing, speech, art or music. In situations of anger and fear, you might need to examine how you can change your response so you truly can see why you're acting the way you are.

Much like Western medicine's idea of heart disease, whereby stationary blood leads to problems, emotions that don't flow smoothly like water and are held in place prevent us from moving forward in life. The heart circulates blood to the brain to aid our mental ability. Challenging ourselves with new puzzles, adventures and even new forms of physical activity eases the mind and stimulates new thoughts and memories.

Spirit - Focusing on the kidneys and your vital essence: The kidneys have a similar function in both Eastern and Western medicine: filtering water and waste. The movement of *qi* (the body's energy) flows like water, gaining momentum from the smallest spring to the deepest ocean. The kidneys, represented by the water element, sort our life experiences at each stage of life, guiding us toward who we are - physically, spiritually and emotionally.

- Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark The kidneys also are where our vital energy stems from, which keeps us going from the day we are born to the day we die. The equivalence of genetic material that was passed on to us and that we pass on to our children comes from the kidneys. It's like the power plant that supplies us our energy and provides us our inner physical strength through the skeletal system. In fact, supporting the kidneys in acupuncture and with Chinese herbal medicine often is the groundwork for the rest of a treatment.

Strengthening your kidneys can be done in many ways beyond drinking plenty of water. Exercise that builds endurance and stamina, along with meditation, reflection and deep breathing, all help build essence. Forms of mixed martial arts also have traditionally been used in this way. However, increasing popularity and interest in slower arts such as *tai chi* and *qigong* also can help improve fortitude, balance and coordination. Strengthening our physical body and spirit helps us face our fears and the mysteries of the unknown throughout life.

Immunity - Focusing on the lungs and protection: The lungs serve as our first introduction to the outside environment from the second we take our first breath. Since they have so much contact with the outside world, the lungs often are attacked by environmental factors, leading to colds, flu and shortness of breath. The immune system is associated with the lungs. Coughing and sneezing to get allergens and irritants out of the body becomes just one of the defense systems with which the lungs are involved.

- Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark The lungs and skin (which are related) are represented by the metal element, shielding us from everything outside of the body that can do us harm. Sweating and fevers are seen as ways the lungs try to expel pathogens in the body. This often is why sweating out a fever can be beneficial in early-stage illness.

There are ways to tonify the lungs and build immunity in the body. Dry-brushing the skin before bathing and deep breathing exercises help detox the body and relieve stress. You also can boost your defense system by incorporating forms of preventative medicine into your life. Classic medical textbooks discuss treating patients for health conditions a season or two before they begin. The body becomes stronger before it is attacked by illness. This is especially useful for people who are prone to seasonal health conditions.

For example, many people suffer from springtime allergies due to the change in the weather or the growth of new plants that produce pollen. Boosting the lungs and preparing the immune system by using acupuncture, diet therapy to decrease inflammation, and creating a home environment that limits outdoor and indoor

allergies in the fall and winter integrates this concept into your health.

Detoxification - Focusing on the liver and life goals: The liver has many functions in both Western and Eastern medicine, as it detoxifies the body by processing and changing one substance into another. It also works to store excess nutrients to be used later. The liver represents the wood element. It grows and constantly changes. It often is associated with our ability to move forward in life and set measurable goals for ourselves.

- Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark In Western medicine, the liver is one of the most tested and analyzed systems because of its importance to overall health. As it detoxifies the substances in our physical body, it also cleans the mental and emotional aspects we place on ourselves to achieve our goals, dreams and ambitions.

We all are aware of the benefits and curses of stress we face every day that can impact our health in many ways. When stress provides us with a chance to prove ourselves, it can be good. When it becomes too much, our health takes a hit, leading to physical and emotional changes. Problems quickly can arise when the liver becomes imbalanced, and people tend to turn to stimulants and other substances to help them compensate.

Harmonizing the liver involves creating realistic goals for oneself, examining how we respond emotionally to situations, and detoxifying the negative aspects of our lives. Short-term cleansing, changes in environment and organizing clutter may not seem like medically proven health suggestions, but don't underestimate how a clean outside environment can help the inside soul.

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