

The Practical Herbalist -- Ginger

Ginger is one of the great food herbs known to man. Used throughout Asia in many types of traditional dishes, ginger is a spice that many cooks can simply not do without. It has now become a popular supplement and promoted as the herb for all problems of the stomach and indigestion. While ginger is very important in this regard, as with many herbs it is not that simple.

Ginger is a yellow root that considered warming in nature and is unlike many herbs that are warming to the whole body. Ginger is very specific in its ability to warm the process of digestion. The digestive process in Chinese herbal medicine is seen as a process similar to composting, where heat is used to break down organic matter into nutrient rich materials. Many of the things we eat are said to cool the digestion. The over eating of raw foods, iced beverages, frozen treats, and over consumption of sugars and carbohydrates, tend to cool the digestion making the “composting” process inefficient. That inefficiency can manifest in many different ways depending on the person. Sometimes it is a tightness to the stomach, or unsettled full feelings after meals. Sometimes there is loose or soft stool. Sometimes the coolness causes a backing up of the stomach creating the situation where heat that is supposed to be a part of the digestion gets backed up, creating acid reflux, or heartburn.

This ability to “warm” the the digestion is why ginger is eaten with sushi and sashimi (Japanese dishes made with raw fish). It is also why ginger ale was a classic home remedy for stomach upset, and why ginger snap cookies are a favorite during the cold of winter. The ability to warm the body and help the body digest hard to digest foods made it invaluable.

There are many herbs in traditional Chinese medicine which are always given with ginger. Some of these herbs are so strong they are toxic and can make a person very sick. However it was found that if these herbs were cooked or prepared with ginger, the ginger rendered the herbs safe, without decreasing the effectiveness of the herbs.

Not all stomach conditions are caused by a cooling of the digestion. Some types of acid reflux and heartburn are caused not by coolness contracting the stomach and causing a backup of heat, but rather a condition of excess heat in the Stomach. This is that situation where the digestion is working too hard. This can happen due to some types of food poisoning, flu, or sometimes emotional upset. The patient is often red in the face , has a burning nausea, and has a strong appetite and thirst. In these types of situations ginger will only add to the heat, and not relieve the situation. In these situations green tea, as well as cold herbal formulas are called for to cool the excess heat into balance.

It can be difficult to really tell when ginger should be used. It is a very safe herb and therefore it is appropriate to try ginger when you have a stomach problem. If it does not provide relief quickly then you should stop and seek the advice of a herbalist who can better determine what is really needed to resolve the situation.

David Bock C.Ac. Dipl. CH, Dipl.Ac
is a Nationally Board Certified (NCCAOM) Acupuncturist and Chinese Herbalist-
www.hartlandorientalmed.com