

The Practical Herbalist -- Diet and Sugar

Herbal medicine starts with the understanding of diet and how food effects the body. Societal pressure shapes what we eat. It is hard to avoid the types of foods that make us as obese as we are in this country. Our bad eating habits unfortunately sometimes come from good intentions.

There have been times in our past when food was not as plentiful. We as a society use food to convey our concern for others and providing food is a way of caring for others. So when we invite friends over we serve fancy or richer foods to our friends and family than we would otherwise make for ourselves. We buy foods that are “extra fortified with vitamins and minerals”. We see providing a sweet treat as a reward. A reward that has lost its meaning in an era when sugar is cheap and readily available. Mothers still insist that it is insulting to the cook not to eat all the food on your plate.

We wonder why we are getting fat and look for an enemy to blame, sugar, carbs, fat, TV... It is hard to say, “no I do not need more food”, when our history says that you should eat all that is good for you. We have never been able to grasp the concept of “too much of a good thing”.

I remember when my child was in kindergarten. I tried to be careful and feed her a balanced meal. One morning I was short on time and she got only a piece of toast and jelly for breakfast. I was unconcerned since she carried a well balanced lunch with her to school. At school two kids brought in birthday treats, frosted brownies and cake and ice cream. My daughter was not hungry at lunch. After school was a girl scout program where the leaders rewarded the girls for good behavior with candy. Upon returning home she ran to play with the neighbor, whose father thought it would be great to take advantage of the ice cream truck that came by and treated the kids to big ice cream treats. Thanks to kindness, my daughter did not feel well at dinner and didn't eat much. The question becomes, when is kindness being harmful, and what are we teaching our children about the foods we value. Sugar and treats held a greater value in society than the vegetables in my well prepared meals.

I am not saying that there is something bad about enjoyable rich sweet foods, only that the quantity that we consume is out of balance with the amounts of other types of food and the amounts of activity we get. Medicinal Herbs of the past were used effectively because they were extreme foods. Some were described as “sweet”. I think it is unlikely that those same herbs would have the same effect in a modern child who has a system that is awash in sugar on a daily basis.

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