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6 Principles of Using Food as Medicine



In 1973, when I was a researcher at the National Institute of Mental Health and beginning to become interested in alternative therapies, I met Shyam Singha, a London-based Indian osteopath, naturopath, herbalist, acupuncturist, homeopath, and meditation master. Shyam had gleaming yellow eyes and flowing black hair, and wore impeccably tailored Savile Row suits or floor-length, orange silk gowns.

Lecturing, he paced the front of the hall like a panther. A brilliant, challenging, occasionally terrifying trickster, he became my guide to the frontiers of healing. Together Shyam and I cooked meals that astonished my taste buds, raised my energy, and lifted my mood. The fast, "chaotic" breathing meditation he had learned in the Indian mountains pushed me through fear and anger.

Shortly after meeting Shyam, I was crippled by a back injury. The orthopedists were issuing dire warnings and getting me ready for a surgery I didn't want.

Desperate, I called Shyam in London. "Eat three pineapples a day, and nothing else for a week," he said.

I thought the phone had gone bad, and then suspected, not for the first time, that he was mad. He repeated it and explained, using principles of Chinese medicine, how the pineapple would "work on your lung" (which is the "mother of the kidney," and that the kidney was "connected" to the back. It made no sense to me then, but I knew that Shyam knew many things that I and the orthopods didn't.

And I really didn't want back surgery.

Amazingly, the pineapple fast worked. Later, Shyam suggested eliminating gluten, dairy, sugar, red meat and processed food to relieve my occasional allergies, asthma, and eczema. That worked.

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[NOTE: Some sentiments contained within "What We're Reading" articles may not strictly conform with PROJECT: PFC's nutritional outlook. We read articles containing opposing information all the time and derive our nutritional philosophies from the latest science, the opinions of experts worldwide and our anecdotal experiences in the field. We keep an open mind and a strong affinity for fact-based evidence to help make the world of nutrition "Simple Again" for you.]

6 Basic Principles of Using Food as Medicine



In 1973, when I was a researcher at the National Institute of Mental Health and beginning to become interested in alternative therapies, I met Shyam Singha, a London-based Indian osteopath, naturopath, herbalist, acupuncturist, homeopath, and meditation master. Shyam had gleaming yellow eyes and flowing black hair, and wore impeccably tailored Savile Row suits or floor-length, orange silk gowns.

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Amazingly, the pineapple fast worked. Later, Shyam suggested I eliminate gluten, dairy, sugar, red meat and processed food to relieve my occasional allergies, asthma, and eczema. That worked, too.

Ever since, I too have been committed to using food as medicine. Soon I was reading scientific studies that were validating the therapeutic power of traditional remedies and suggesting the need to eliminate or cut down on foods that had become staples of the standard American diet. I began to prescribe nutritional therapies for my medical and psychiatric patients.

By the early 1990s, I had decided it was time to teach what I was learning to my students at Georgetown Medical School. I asked Susan Lord, MD, my colleague at The Center for Mind-Body Medicine, to join me. To honor Hippocrates, who coined the phrase, we called our course "Food As Medicine," and it quickly became a hit with med students.

The students experimented with diets that eliminated sugar, gluten, dairy, food additives, red meat and caffeine. Many felt less anxious and more energetic; they slept and studied better and learned more easily. They shook their heads at how little attention their curriculum paid to nutrition.

A few years later, Susan and I made an expanded version of this course available nation-wide, to medical school faculty, physicians, other health professionals and anyone who was interested in improving her own nutrition.

Together with the dietician Kathie Swift, we created exactly the course we wish we'd had in school — one combining impeccable science and traditional wisdom, presented in the most interesting, practical user-friendly way. We called it "Food As Medicine" (FAM) and we continue to offer it every year.

The course is comprehensive, but the basic principles are simple and straightforward:

1. Eat in harmony with your genetic programming — i.e., the way our hunter-gatherer ancestors ate.

This doesn't mean conforming to a strict Paleo diet, but rather following the guidelines it suggests. Consider a whole foods plant-based diet with as little processed food and added sugar as possible.

Ideally this means consuming far fewer grains (understanding that some people can't tolerate wheat and other grains at all); little or no dairy (even if you don't seem intolerant to it); cold water fish like salmon, sardines and mackerel as the preferred animal product; and far more intestine-activating fiber — we consume a paltry average of 15 grams a day; our Paleolithic ancestors took in 100 grams.

2. Use foods rather than supplements to treat and prevent chronic illness.

Whole foods contain a number of substances that work synergistically and may be far more effective than supplements that just deliver one of them.

Why take the powerful antioxidant lycopene in a pill when you can eat a tomato that contains both lycopene and a number of other antioxidants, along with vitamins, minerals and other nutrients that work together to prevent heart disease by decreasing cholesterol and lipid levels and stopping abnormal blood clotting?

3. Combine your nutritional plan with a program to reduce stress and raise awareness about how as well as what we eat.

Stress inhibits and interferes with every aspect of digestive functioning and with the efficient use of nutrients. Stressed-out people can't make very good biological use of even the most healthy diets.

Learning to eat slowly and mindfully will increase your enjoyment of meals, reduce your consumption of food (most of us eat so fast we don't have time to register signals from our stomach that we are full), and help you make food choices that are better for you.

4. Understand that we are all, as the pioneering biochemist Roger Williams pointed out 50 years ago, biochemically unique.

We may be the same age and ethnicity, have very similar health status, ethnicity, and income, but you may use 100 times as much B6 as I do, and I may require 100 times more Zinc.

Sometimes we may need a nutritionally oriented physician, dietician or nutritionist to do specific, sophisticated tests to determine our deficiencies and requirements. We can always learn a great deal about what's good for us by experimenting with different diets and foods, and by paying close attention to the outcomes.

5. Find a health professional who will help you begin treatment of chronic conditions with nutrition and stress management (as well as exercise) rather than medication.

Except in life threatening situations, this is the sane, common sense way to go. The prescription antacids, Type 2 diabetes drugs, and antidepressants that tens of millions of Americans use to decrease acid reflux, lower blood sugar, and improve mood, only treat symptoms and do not address causes. And they have very significant and often dangerous side-effects. If they are only prescribed, as they should be, after a thorough trial of non-pharmacological treatment, they will rarely be necessary.

6. Don't become a food fanatic.

Use these guidelines (and others that make sense to you), but don't beat yourself up for deviating from them. Just notice the effect of a questionable choice, learn, and return to your program.

And don't waste your time and energy judging others for what they eat! It will just make you cranky and self-righteous, stressful emotional states that will ruin your digestion. And it sure won't do those other people any good.

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