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THE CARE & FEEDING OF INFANTS ACCORDING TO TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE

by Bob Flaws

I am a traditional Chinese doctor specializing in gynecology. For the last 20 years, many of my patients have been mothers and I am always being asked what traditional Chinese medicine can do for my patients' children. Therefore, in 1984, I went back to China to continue my studies at the Shanghai College of Traditional Chinese Medicine to specifically learn more about Chinese pediatrics. During that time, I not only took classroom courses at the college but also did a clinical internship at the Yue Yang Traditional Chinese Hospital under the guidance of Dr. Chen Li-chen, a specialist in traditional Chinese pediatrics. When I returned to the United States, I broadened my clinical practice to also include the specialty of pediatrics. In the five years since, diagnosing and treating babies on a daily basis has become a regular part of my clinical work. Based on that experience, there are a few key pieces of wisdom Chinese medicine has regarding the feeding of babies which I would like to share with American mothers.

Pediatrics have been a professional specialty within traditional Chinese medicine since the Song dynasty (960 CE) when the great doctor Qian Yi first outlined the specific differences between children and adults. According to Chinese medicine, babies, both anatomically and physiologically, are not just miniature adults. Rather, they are immature and unique. Among the dozen or so ways that children under six are different from adults, one of the most important is that their digestion is inherently weak.

Because of this inherent immaturity and weakness in digestion, Chinese medicine believes that almost all pediatric diseases under the age of six begin as a form of indigestion. Therefore, the corollary to this is that if one wants to keep their baby healthy and well, a well regulated diet is of utmost importance.

But, before the traditional Chinese views on what constitutes a well regulated diet will make sense to a twentieth century, American mother, we must first review Chinese medicine's description of the digestive process. Then, what I have to say about the specifics of feeding babies will make clear and logical sense. Also, the reader must be cautioned that traditional Chinese medicine is a complete, time-tested, professional medical system which, as a system, is completely unrelated and dissimilar to modern Western medicine. Each system is systematic only in relation to concepts within that system. Therefore, one closed system should not and cannot be judged by the facts and criteria of another closed system. For me, the bottom line is that traditional Chinese medicine as a system has worked for a quarter of the world's population for over two thousand years and, in my experience, works equally well here in the United States amongst non-Chinese.

According to Chinese medicine, digestion is a process of cooking and distillation. The Stomach is likened to a pot on a stove or to a fermentation tun. The Stomach receives food and liquids which it then "rotten and ripens".

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The so-called Spleen of Chinese medicine (not to be confused with the spleen of Western biology) then separates the Pure part of the digestate from the Turbid. It sends the Pure "up" to become Qi (energy) and Blood (nutritive fluids) and it sends the Turbid "down" to be excreted from the body as feces and urine. Therefore, the Spleen's role is to "transport and transform", and, in Chinese medicine, transformation implies a change or distillation through warming or heating. In a sense, the Pure part of the digestate arises similar to an elixir or spirits arising during the distillation of alcohol. When digestion is healthy and proceeding well, the Pure arises and the Turbid descends with maximum separation and efficiency. The organism then creates abundant Qi and Blood and excretes all metabolic wastes in a timely manner.

However, if the digestion is weak or inefficient, the Pure and Turbid are not completely separated and this Turbidity collects first in the Stomach. In Chinese medicine, the Pure is Yang and the Turbid is Yin. When this Turbid Yin accumulates, it can develop into Stagnant Food, Dampness, and Phlegm, all Yin pathologic and pathogenic substances. It is the accumulation of these three Turbid Yin substances which is at the root of the majority of pediatric complaints.

Stagnant Food, a professionally diagnosed category or Pattern of Disharmony in traditional Chinese medicine, causes indigestion, gas, abdominal distention, hiccup, burping, colic, vomiting of milk or food immediately after eating, and constipation or diarrhea. Dampness in babies mostly manifests as runny nose, drooling, and loose stools, but it is also associated with wet rashes and any other wet

discharge, such as from the eyes. Phlegm manifests as mucous, i.e. nasal mucous and cough with mucous as well as possible mucous in the stools. Stagnant Food is incompletely combusted and separated food and Dampness is incompletely evaporated and distilled liquids. They are mutually co-productive and when they augment and congeal, they transform into Phlegm. In Chinese medicine, Phlegm is congealed Turbid Dampness produced in babies through incomplete digestion.

When these three Yin Turbid substances accumulate, they block the flow and circulation of the baby's (and adult's) Yang Qi or energy. Qi, being Yang, is Warm, moving, and tends to rise. If its circulation is impeded by a Yin pathologic substance, it tends to transform into a pathologic Heat and this Heat will tend, eventually, to rise. Therefore, Stagnant Food in the Stomach and Intestines typically becomes Hot Turbidity in the Stomach. Dampness becomes Damp Heat. And Phlegm becomes Hot Phlegm.

Any mother or clinician should, at this point, be recognizing the salient features of most pediatric disease: fever, indigestion, mucous, and wet discharges. All of these begin as Stagnant Food and Dampness. Take, for instance, earaches, the nemesis of the modern American parent.

According to traditional Chinese medicine, there is an internal pathway or channel connecting the Stomach and Intestines to the inner ear (the Hand *Yang Ming* Longitudinal *Luo Mai*). When Stagnant Food accumulates in the Stomach and Intestines and eventually transforms into Turbid Heat, this Heat drafts up this internal pathway to rise to the *cul de sac* of the inner ear where it fulminates. There it is experienced as pain and

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eventually there may even be a pussy, purulent discharge from the ear. In Chinese medicine such a discharge evidences the presence of Dampness and Heat. The traditional Chinese medical treatment of earache in infants is, therefore, directed at clearing this Heat from the digestive tract, gently purging the Bowels of Stagnant Food, eliminating the Dampness, and strengthening and regulating the digestion, thus reducing the fever and stopping the pain.

Likewise, colic, fever associated with teething, most colds, vomiting, diarrhea, nausea and indigestion, and persistent coughs in children under six years of age are all due to this same scenario of Stagnant Food, Dampness, and Phlegm eventually causing the accumulation of Heat which in turn gives rise to fever. All of these common pediatric complaints are well treated by Chinese medicine by either herbal, pediatric, patent medicines, *Tui Na* remedial infant massage, and/or acupuncture. However, the most important, underlying treatment and the most important, root preventive therapy is the proper regulation of the child's diet. If one is able to accept the logic of the above description of digestion and pathogenesis, then hopefully what I say next will also make sense, even though, admittedly, it runs counter to current, popular American belief.

In my experience, Stagnant Food in American infants begins with unregulated breast feeding. That means feeding on demand. Because babies' digestion is immature and inefficient, it must be given adequate space and time to do its job. If the baby is fed too often and too much, its *Qi Ji* or Qi Mechanism which insures ascension of the Pure and descension of the Turbid becomes over-stuffed. This is regardless of the quality of

the breast milk. That means, in my opinion and according to the accumulated two thousand plus years wisdom of traditional Chinese medicine, even breast-fed babies should be fed on schedule, not on demand.

In professional Chinese medicine, Food Stagnation in infants is diagnosed by observing the vein at the base of the index finger at the palmar side of the metacarpal-phalangeal joint. This is called diagnosing the Vessel of the Three Passes at the Tiger's Maw. Normally, only the faintest, pink vein should be visible in the infant here. If this vein is engorged, prominent, and purplish, this signifies Stagnant Food. If it is red purplish, this Stagnant Food has become mutually bound up with pathologic Heat due to obstruction of the Yang Qi by Yin Turbidity. In my experience, the majority of American infants I have seen all have this diagnostic sign regardless of whether they have been fed on breast milk or formula if the babies have been fed on demand as are most in the USA today. If treated for Stagnant Food by Chinese medicine, this vein does become less prominent and less purple. And further, as this vein becomes less prominent and purple, the baby's symptoms or tendency to illness likewise abate.

When babies are fed on schedule and not necessarily on demand, and if their Qi Mechanism has not been over-stuffed with Stagnant Food and Dampness, babies typically first become ill when so-called solid food is introduced. The introduction of solid foods is a critical juncture in the infant's development. First of all, mother's milk is the best and most perfect nutrition for newborns. Other types of milk and formulas are all second best and may, therefore, unavoidably cause some problems.

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Solid foods do not need to be and, in my opinion, should not be introduced to the baby's diet until he or she grabs for them and attempts to eat them on their own. This is usually around five to seven months of age and often naturally parallels teething. However, eating anything other than breast milk is a new endeavor for the child. Just as a child must have reached a certain level of physical development before he or she can ride a bicycle, likewise eating solid foods also requires a certain level of development and then some practice. We all recognize the need for beginners of all other activities to be especially slow and careful in their initial attempts. Therefore, babies should be recognized as novice eaters and should be given a beginner's diet.

A beginner's diet means choosing and making foods as easily digestible as possible. Obviously the closer a food is to mother's milk, the less adjustment will be needed for the baby's system to process that substance. That is why cow's milk is better for babies than soy milk. According to traditional Chinese medicine, every food has certain inherent characteristics. Each food has one or more inherent Tastes: Sweet, Sour, Bitter, Acrid, or Salty. Each food has an inherent Temperature, either Cold, Cool, Neutral, Warm, or Hot. And each food has other inherent characteristics which make it more or less digestible. For instance, some foods are inherently Damp or promote the secretion of Body Fluids. If the digestive process is not up to transporting and transforming those Fluids, they will accumulate and become pathologic Dampness and Phlegm.

Since the process of digestion is based on Warm transformation and is essentially the same as

cooking or stewing on the inside of the body, baby foods should be Warm in nature and should be cooked. Whether babies or adults, whatever goes into our Stomachs *must* be transformed into 100 degree soup *before* its essence can be extracted and incorporated into the body, call that essence Qi or nutritive substances. Therefore, the first foods introduced should be Warm, cooked, pureed, and reasonably dilute. Personally, I recommend mothers beginning their babies on dilute rice soup. This is called *shi fan* or water rice in Chinese. It is made by cooking 1 part rice to 6 parts water at a low temperature for several hours or overnight. After several hours, the rice breaks down into a thin, milky soup similar in consistency to breast milk. As the baby's digestion matures, this soup can be made thicker with less water. This soup can also be admixed to bottled breast milk or formula.

After a month or so, the baby's ability to digest well-cooked white rice should be well consolidated. At that point, the mother can introduce another new food. Cooked carrots are good since, according to Chinese medicine, they benefit the digestion and strengthen the Stomach/Spleen. These should be well-cooked, pureed, and fed warm. If the baby shows any sign of digestive upset or inability to separate this food's Pure from Turbid, it should be withdrawn from the diet for several weeks before trying it again. In the meantime, the baby's digestion will have become a little stronger due to the natural maturing process.

Each new food should be introduced in the same way. A food should be fed *by itself* once per day for a week or so to see if the baby can handle it. Grains are inherently hard to digest and need to

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be especially well cooked. Vegetables are less difficult to digest but the cabbage family can cause gas (a species of Qi disturbance) and some squash can cause Dampness. The professionally agreed upon, Chinese medical Temperatures and natures of 150 common foods are listed in *Prince Wen Hui's Cook, Chinese Dietary Therapy* written by myself and Honora Lee Wolfe.¹

This means that, according to Chinese medical theory, raw fruits and vegetables should not be a main stay of a young child's diet. Apples, for instance, are inherently Cool and promote the production of Body Fluids, i.e. Dampness. Bananas are not just Cool but Cold and, although they can clear Heat and purge the Intestines when needed remedially, they also tend to weaken the Stomach/Spleen. Celery is Cool and clears Heat, sedates Yang. That means it too has a tendency to weaken the digestion, especially if the Righteous Warmth of the Stomach/Spleen is fragile, as it is in infants. Pears are Cool and produce Fluids which easily transform into Dampness in a baby. And oranges likewise are Cool and tend to create Dampness. Cooking fruits and vegetables usually makes a Cool food Neutral or Warm. This also helps to make that food a little less Damp.

The Sweet flavor itself has the characteristic of promoting Dampness. In dilute, naturally occurring concentrations, Sweetness strengthens the digestion and the body as a whole. But in concentrated form, it has just the opposite effect. It weakens the Spleen and impedes the digestion by smothering it in Fluid. Therefore, chilled fruit juices are especially deleterious to children's health, even though they love them.

Simply drinking too much liquid and, even more, chilled liquids with other, somewhat hard to digest foods, such as grains, will tend to create Damp Turbidity. Cheese and peanut butter also tend to create a lot of Phlegm and Dampness due to their inherently Damp natures. And yet, these are the foods fed to so many infants and toddlers by American mothers who are short on time and traditional wisdom and by day care centers for the same two reasons.

That is also why so many American toddlers have chronic earaches, runny noses, and persistent coughs. Our children are being fed too frequently as newborns and fed largely the wrong foods in their infancy. Then, when they do inevitably become sick, the antibiotics used to treat these problems only weaken the babies' digestion even further, being, according to Chinese medicine, extremely Cold in nature in order to offset the production of fever. Antibiotics Clear pathologic Heat, but at the same time they cool the Righteous Warmth of the Stomach/Spleen. This weakens the Stomach/Spleen's ability to transform and transport foods and liquids, thus giving rise to increased Dampness, Stagnant Food, and Phlegm. These three Yin substances then cause the renewed accumulation of Heat and this explains the chronic, recidivist tendency of many pediatric diseases treated by antibiotics.

Babies, just like adults, easily develop bad habits, such as eating unnecessarily and craving things which ultimately are not good for them. What child will not eat ice cream to its heart's content? But ice cream is probably one of the most deleterious foods devised by self-indulgent humanity. It is iced Cold, tens of times too Sweet, and way too Damp, a disastrous

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combination. As a pediatrician, I see a direct link between Halloween bags stuffed with candy and the onset of persistent late Fall, early Winter coughs and sore throats. Adults, being adult, are *supposed* to judge and supervise their children whose judgement and life experience are just as weak and immature as their digestion.

Babies do not need to eat a variety of different foods at each meal. Nor do they need to eat all the fruits, fruit juices, and raw vegetables, cheese, yogurt, chilled milk, peanut butter, and sweets they are typically allowed to eat here in America. Although Western nutritional science says most of these foods are full of vitamins, calcium, and protein, the shibboleths of Western nutrition, in fact, babies and children are not healthy eating such a diet. It is an unnatural diet which has developed only in the past sixty years or so. Before mass interstate and intercontinental transportation of refrigerated food stuffs and their refrigerated storage in market and home, humans living in temperate climates never had access to all the tropical fruits and juices and raw vegetables we now take for granted every time we enter a supermarket. The human organism and its nutritional needs have evolved over tens of millions of years. But in the space of fifty years, we have created an entirely new diet which we justify by juggling numbers.

In short, we have lost sight of the forest for the trees. Western science has spent so much myopic time examining the minutiae of life that it has lost sight of the broad generalizations which have been tested empirically for hundreds of generations. When some Western clinician does return to the old verities about diet and nutrition, it becomes a new-fangled notion

called the Pritikin Diet as if it were just discovered. In a sense, the diet I am advocating for American children is sort of a pediatric Pritikin Diet. It is also similar to Macrobiotics but without any emphasis on eating Japanese or Chinese foods per se. Chinese medicine can well delineate and substantiate the various Disease Mechanisms which arise over years and decades beginning with pediatric Stagnant Food.² However, this is all just the age-old wisdom of people living traditionally in consonance with nature and with the laws of human development. If orange juice were necessary for a child to grow up a healthy, robust adult, then prior to fifty years ago there would have been few Europeans or Americans.

When studying traditional Chinese pediatrics with Dr. Chen Li-chen at the Yue Yang Hospital, he asked me what the most common pediatric problems were in the United States. The first thing I mentioned was earache. He looked around at the other senior physicians gathered and they all agreed that earaches are not much of a problem in China. Western doctors say that children's propensity for earaches is an anatomical fact due to the proximity of their Eustachian tubes to their naso-pharyngeal cavity. If that were the case, then Chinese toddlers should have just as many earaches as their American counterparts. But, it seems, they do not. Why they do not is, in my opinion, due to the lesser prevalence of pediatric Stagnant Food in China in turn due to their simpler, wiser diet. While interning at the Yue Yang Hospital with Dr. Chen in 1984, I did not see a single case of pediatric otitis media.

Since returning from China in 1984, I have had occasion to invite Chinese doctors fresh from the

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Peoples Republic of China to sit in my clinic and observe my patient population. On more than one such occasion, Chinese doctors have shook their heads in dismay on hearing what American mothers were routinely feeding their children based on Western, so-called scientific notions. Even more importantly, when American mothers have changed their babies' diets according to the above outlined wisdom of traditional Chinese medicine, their children have recovered their health and have gotten sick less often.

Once a child is sick due to an accumulation of Stagnant Food, Dampness, and Phlegm admixed with pathologic Heat, Chinese medicine does have a full panoply of benign, humane, and holistic treatments to restore health. As mentioned above, there are a number of Chinese pediatric patent medicines designed specifically to remedy such Turbid Yin and pathological Heat conditions which are dosed for administration to infants and toddlers. These need to be professionally prescribed by competently trained practitioners of traditional Chinese medicine. In addition, special pediatric acupuncture and pediatric infant massage can also treat remedially such pathological conditions once they have arisen. However, as also stated above, the proper adjustment of the child's diet is the *best single preventive remedy* for the vast majority of pediatric diseases.

Eating well-cooked, freshly prepared, fresh vegetables and grains, including easily digestible crackers, breads, and noodles, is not as simple as giving the kid a raw carrot and a piece of cheese to gnosh on. Nor is a glass of warm or room temperature water as tasty as a glass of chilled apple or orange juice. Our culture neither

supports the time it takes to purchase and prepare freshly cooked foods nor the discipline required to eat what is right and not just what pleases us. Chinese medicine is based on the Doctrine of the Mean and we live in extreme times. But tens of millions of years of evolution cannot be denied. If we want to see our children healthy, we must begin by improving their diets. This means returning to our traditional nutritional wisdom which, in temperate climates, is remarkably universal. The pediatric dietary therapy I am suggesting is in no way valuable because it is Chinese and therefore exotic. It is valuable because it works. It is simply that traditional Chinese medicine has clearly reasoned statements of why it works and two thousand years of written case histories to substantiate its opinions.

Interestingly, American naturopaths also identify wheat, dairy, corn, soy products, red meats, sugar, and fruit juices as the most common pediatric food "allergies" associated with children's recurrent earaches.³ Each of these foods is, according to Chinese medicine, either hard to digest, Damp, Phlegmatic, and/or weakening to the Spleen. Although American naturopaths may have a different explanation of why these foods are associated with earaches -- allergic response -- still their food for food identification shows the universality of what Chinese medicine has to say.

Chinese medicine is not just a folk medicine. It is a highly literate, professional medicine based on rational theory tested by millennia of empirical, clinical experience. As such, it is the oldest, continuously practiced, literate professional medicine in the world. Its hallmark is its common sense theories logically derived

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from a direct, general observation of nature. These general and humane theories are like a treasure map for humanity wallowing in a morass of scientific minutiae. Those interested in reading further about traditional Chinese pediatrics are referred to my *Turtle Tail and Other Tender Mercies, Traditional Chinese Pediatrics*⁴. Those interested in reading more about the Chinese concept of health vis a vis diet are referred to my *Nine Ounces*⁵. And those interested in a general introduction to traditional Chinese medicine are referred to *The Web That Has No Weaver* by Ted Kaptchuk.⁶

ENDNOTES

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4 Flaws, Bob, *Turtle Tail and Other Tender Mercies, Traditional Chinese Pediatrics*, Blue Poppy Press, Boulder, CO, 1985

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6 Kaptchuk, Ted, *The Web That Has No Weaver*, Congdon & Weed, NY, 1983

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