

Western Energetics - Betzy Bancroft, RH

Energetics is the recognition that we are nature, and the same patterns and laws at play in the observable natural world are also functioning within the plants and the human body. Early philosophers recognized the principle of ‘as above, so below’, and with modern tools we can appreciate just how true this is. For example, motion is faster in a warm environment, whether in our cells or stew pot. Our Western energetic system, Humoral Medicine, was developed by the Greeks in the early part of our common era and spread by the extensive writings of Galen.

The four fundamental qualities are heat, cold, damp and dry. They are common to other medical systems because we share the same nature. The west has maintained four elements or constitutional types – Earth (Melancholic), Air (Sanguine), Fire (Choleric) and Water (Phlegmatic), each characterized by these qualities.

Heat, Cold, Dampness and Dryness each have particular characteristics that affect our structures, organs and their functions. By recognizing the influence of each quality on the body, we can learn to see the patterns that these natural qualities create. Plants possess each of these qualities as well, and we employ the opposite energy to promote balance—for example a cooling herb applied to a hot condition.

Heat – active, hyper-function, stimulating, rising, floating. Heating remedies warm the body, increase its kinetic functions such as digestion, metabolism and circulation; they promote a steady inner fire that burns cleanly.

Herbs with heating effects include our pungent spices: ginger, garlic, cayenne, prickly ash, cinnamon, rosemary, oregano, bee balm, horseradish, black pepper, mustard seed. Warming foods include more protein and fat (calorie) rich--nuts/seeds, eggs, meats. Vigorous exercise and action are heating influences in life.

Balance any excessive heat with cooling remedies, foods, habits (see next section).

Signs of heat:

feeling of uncomfortable heat/ aversion to heat

prefers cold drinks & food/ excessive thirst

quick exhaustion of energy

undue discomfort in fevers, on hot days

burning & irritation in pit of stomach

weak and rapid pulse

yellow mucus, stools, urine

dark, scanty urination

red face, eyes, tongue / yellow coated tongue

tender, swollen, hot tissues

warm skin, hands, feet

irritability/ hypersensitivity

constipation- esp with hard, dry stool

excessive or accelerated function/metabolism

prone to inflammation

dislikes pressure, massage

likes to stretch, sleeps stretched out

loud voice, talkative

Cold - slow, heavy, depressed, sinking, hypo-function, thickening or condensing. Cooling remedies reduce excessive stimulation, sensitivity, heat; they tend to be grounding, calming and soothing. They include bitters-dandelion root, artichoke leaf, gentian; demulcents – marshmallow, plantain; and relaxants like skullcap, motherwort, blue vervain. Cooling foods include fruits and vegetables, cooling habits include meditation, slow exercise like walking. (Bitter herbs are a special category of cooling remedies because they stimulate digestive secretions and thus assimilation, and so don't depress our functions. But they are grounding and steady!)

Warm, stimulate and circulate to balance excess cold--spices and exercise are ideal (previous section).

Signs of cold:

feelings of coldness/ aversion to cold
prefers warm food and drinks/ craves warmth
slowness, dull or unresponsive/ lethargy, little movement
laxity of joints
pale moist tongue/ white tongue coat
pale or bluish, purplish skin, tongue, etc.
clear discharges, urine, nasal, mucus/ tendency to phlegm
slow or deep pulse
achy pain in joints, flesh
low blood pressure
cold extremities/ lack of circulation
lacking sensation or stimulation
tendency toward stagnation
prefers deep massage
curled lying posture or hunched over
quiet voice, soft and shallow breathing

Damp – involves the fluids of the body (interstitial, blood, lymph, sweat, urine, other secretions); congesting & stagnating from lack of circulation; or running & leaking from excessively relaxed or porous tissues.

When dampness is accumulated in edema or boggieness, remedy by moving the dampness out of eliminatory channels (diaphoretics-yarrow, elderflower; diuretics-nettle, parsley, dandelion leaf; alteratives-cleavers, red clover) or circulating excess moisture with aromatics (angelica, thyme, mugwort). When tissues are leaking, tighten them with astringents (raspberry leaf, blackberry root, meadowsweet) or heal them with vulneraries (plantain or calendula).

Signs of dampness:

edema
watery stool
lassitude/ excessively relaxed
no desire to drink, even if thirsty/ intolerance of moist foods
heavy, stiff or sore joints
heavy diarrhea or vaginal discharge
tendency to diarrhea and dyspepsia
excessive salivation & nasal secretions
copious, congealed, or cloudy excretions and secretions
pulse obscured
tongue coated (white)
congested lymph nodes

oozing rashes
feeling of fullness
lack of appetite and sensation of taste
excess of sleep
tendency toward heaviness and turbidity
distention or soreness in chest, head, flank, belly
tendency toward thickness and stagnation

Dryness – indicates a lack of moisture and fluids (dehydration). They may be dried up by excess heat or depletion, like the kettle burning because the tea water evaporated. Dryness in our tissues produces contraction or tightening, withering, lack of lubrication and a lack of nutrition provided by proper hydration, fluid circulation and healthy fats.

Balance excess dryness with demulcents- marshmallow, plantain, comfrey; healthy fats in the diet, and moistening, nourishing tonics – oats, solomon’s seal, burdock root, linden.

Signs of dryness:

dehydration
dry, hard stools
dry, rough, chapped or cracked skin
dry cough, dry tongue
pulse weak, slightly tense
unusually thirsty/no sweating
pale, withered appearance/ wasting
scanty fluids/ creaky joints
rigid or brittle tissues
intolerance of dry foods, attraction to moist foods
discomfort in autumn, dry environments
insomnia
hot water and light oils readily absorbed

References:

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The Practice of Traditional Western Herbalism, Matthew Wood, North Atlantic Books 2004