



# Stomach Pain Is a Mirror of Diseases?

**Dr. Ko Chien-Hsin, Director, Traditional Chinese Medicine Dept.,  
Hualien Tzu Chi Hospital**

When my patients complain about stomach pain, I would always ask: “Breakfast, lunch, and dinner, did you eat when you are supposed to?” It is not about stuffing oneself with food, but rather to eat moderately in a timely manner. Only one thing can happen when someone skips meals when needed, or eats more than needed - retribution. You torment it today, and it torments you back tomorrow.

“My first stomach ache happened in the third year of junior high. Our school had routine cleaning sessions during lunchtime, and half an hour lunch was drastically compressed. I had to eat fast. The habit accumulated, and the pain persisted to this day...” a patient who had been troubled by long-term stomach pain said. When I asked her if she had slowed down her eating pace, the patient shook her head guiltily. Eating irregularly at a rapid pace had become her habit.

Is there a chance for her to be relieved from stomach pain if this is the

case? Whatever the underlying causes are behind the irregular dietary pattern, you have to memorize one principle (and I say it again)—you torment it today, and it torments you back tomorrow.

## **Three Meals a Day in the Right Way**

There is a saying, “eating is more important than an emperor’s order”. The most ideal scenario is to dine like a French cuisine, eating slowly, dedicatedly with adequate time and relaxing mood. This is the best way to manage your stomach. Even when occupied with work, or many other reasons like the aforementioned patient that cut your mealtime short, at least focus on each bite as you eat. Do not spend time on your phone talking business or chatting, allow blood to concentrate at your stomach for proper and effective digestion.

Regarding this point, she answered



with a sense of innocence, “but I eat very slowly already!”

Since eating slow was not an issue for her, it is time for me to speak about dietary avoidances. In TCM, we do not recommend extreme diet. What is classified as extreme diet? Foods that are too hot, too icy, too cold, or too spicy. People with unhealthy stomach should avoid hard to digest food like glutinous rice and mochis, or a sudden change to whole grains.

I have encountered patients who, after recovering an illness or a health examination, vowed to eat only whole grains. Whole grains are nutritious, but people with different constitutions may find whole grains indigestible, hence forcing down food of any kind is generally ill advised. So is whole grain food truly untouchable? The answer is no. However, the dietary process should be changed step by step. For example, if you are accustomed to cooking two cup of white rice, change a quarter-cup to whole grains at first. The gradual alteration can provide ample time for stomach to adjust without any undesired side effects.

We all know to stay away from icy and fried food, but such is human nature: we are troubled if we do not eat, we are troubled if we do eat. I usually ask my patients, “what kind of life do you want to lead?” Choose a life and live it out accordingly.



**Desserts give people a pleasant sensation, or rather, a falsehood of pleasant sensation. It is a deception to our body, not taking care of it. Occasional deceptions may be fine, but our body would protest in the long run.**



The patient asked again, “I eat so little, but I really love desserts. It is something I just cannot quit.”

The reason why people are passionate about desserts is generally to relieve tremendous stress. It is the same as how school children indulge themselves in games and fun prior to exams, our body also naturally seeks out stress relievers. Foods that are sweet or with heavy flavors are at the top of the list. Desserts can elevate blood sugar, generate pleasant sensations, and facilitate happiness. However, it is all but an illusion. It is how we fool our body, not taking care of it. This deception is acceptable on short-term basis, after that, body would begin to protest. Those who lack the awareness would continue to deceive themselves until their body collapses. The scary part of this scam is that our body can compensate for this deception for a short duration without any apparent consequences.

This is a grave mistake, a prelude to the coming illnesses. Many people drink coffee as stimulant, but without adequate physical endurance to begin with, this habit can evolve into coffee dependence, masking the true issue behind it all. Many dessert lovers have issues with obesity, fatigue, and hyperlipidemia. TCM believes that desserts produce sputum, alter one’s constitution into a damp-heat one. Indulgence in the pleasant illusion of desserts would lead to the ignorance of



**People have desires. For those with gastrointestinal issues, the priority is the reconstitution of their body, to avoid foods that are detrimental to health and to embrace those that contribute to health.**



the underlying risks.

Of course, it does not mean that all these food should be prohibited. Eat occasionally in a small portion is the abiding principle. We all have our desires. For those who have stomach issues, the priority should be the reconstitution of their body, to avoid food that is detrimental to health and to embrace those that contribute to health. A patient once told me, “I had a poor childhood with nothing much to eat. Now that I have wealth, I have to watch my mouth because of diabetes and the three-hypers (hyperglycemia, hyperlipidemia, hypertension).” If you fail to take care of your body, once the body collapses, all you can do is to stare into delicious cuisines. That is a whole new level of pain.

### **Root Out the Cause Before Too Late**

On the topic of stomach pain, I am obligated to explain that it is not a disease per se, but a symptom. It is merely a tip of the iceberg. Some people experience pain, for example, while others experience stuffiness, flatulence, acid reflux, or acid burn. All these symptoms are not necessarily caused by stomach. Cardiac infarction or gallstones could lead to stomach pain, diaphragmatic inflammation, and even appendicitis where the pain proliferates to lower right

abdomen. Our senses may be deceived at first and mistaken the symptoms as stomach pain or gastric ulcers. The real culprit is only unraveled only through thorough diagnosis.

Emotions can also be the cause behind the “symptom” of stomach pain. In the five elements we speak of in TCM, “Heart, liver, spleen, lung, and kidney; fire, wood, earth, metal, and water”, wood restricts earth, which is translated to “liver (wood) restricts spleen (earth)” in terms of human anatomy. Our liver operates like an autonomous nervous system, and the spleen mentioned above refers to both stomach and spleen. Whenever we are depressed or angered, our digestive system is immediately affected. Since anger burdens liver and restlessness burdens spleen, eating during those emotional states would obviously lead to stomach pain. Despite our instinctive denial of stress, our body remains honest.

It is very like that the solution to stomach pain is not to deal with it directly. The pain is nothing but a reflection of our anatomical conditions. Some people inhibit acid reflux by taking liquid antacid, but the inhibition of what is needed for digestion may not be good. It is an attempt to remedy to symptoms, not the cause. A wiser tactic would be to trace the cause to the symptoms, which is stomach pain in this case, and deal with it accordingly.