



## Understanding Chinese Medicine: The Concept of Spleen Qi Deficiency

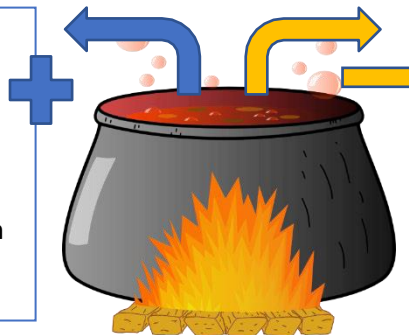
Chinese medicine speaks in metaphors. The ‘Spleen,’ in Chinese medicine, is different than that of Western medicine. Rather than the non-essential organ that filters the blood, the Chinese medical *Spleen* refers to the digestive organs that assimilate and metabolize ingested nutrients in the body. Specifically, the Spleen represents the collective workings of the stomach, small intestine, pancreas and liver. In the center of the body lies these most critical organs which must function optimally for best health. The stomach macerates and mixes the food, breaking it down into absorbable particle size. The pancreas excretes enzymes (amylase, proteases, and lipase) into the intestine, facilitating the absorption of starches, proteins, and fats. It also secretes insulin and glucagon, hormones that regulate the absorption and mobilization of sugars (fuels) for metabolism. The liver secretes bile for fat digestion and is critical for protein and fat deposition and catabolism. The small intestine absorbs nutrients into the blood stream.

The ancient Chinese developed this concept of ‘the Spleen’ while knowing very little of these physiological workings of the body. Yet they surmised that proper digestion and assimilation were critical for a hearty appetite, optimal energy, the production of adequate red blood cells, strong muscles, disease resistance, and reproduction. They did not have blood tests or imaging studies to measure the health of these abdominal organs. But they learned to correlate their observations of the body’s exterior with the health of the Spleen; a strong pulse, bright complexion, and a sturdy musculature, were outward signs of a healthy digestion.

A Healthy Spleen	An Unhealthy Spleen
Strong Appetite; good metabolism	Poor appetite; inability to regulate body weight
Pink colored tongue and complexion	Pale, flabby, swollen tongue and complexion
Strong, well-muscled limbs	Weak, atrophied limbs
A moderate, deep, full pulse	A thin, feeble, and “squishy,” or “soggy” pulse
Regular eliminations of normal consistency	Looser stools
Ability to withstand the elements	Difficulty withstanding Wind, Cold, and Moisture

The Spleen is thought of as the ‘cooking pot’ in the middle of the body, requiring a good cooking temperature for optimal metabolism. When the pot is filled with healthy foods, and warmed adequately with good metabolic energy, the Spleen produces useful substances for the body, such as blood, body fluids, and energy (or Qi). When the pot is filled with less healthy foods, such as those too highly processed, with lots of simple starches and saturated fats, the Spleen produces a useless substance, metaphorically referred to as “Dampness.” This “Dampness” manifests as greasiness of the skin, swelling (edema) in the various tissue linings of the body, and mucus production in the respiratory and gastrointestinal tracts. Along with “Dampness,” blood, body fluid, and Qi *deficiencies* can result with poor digestion.

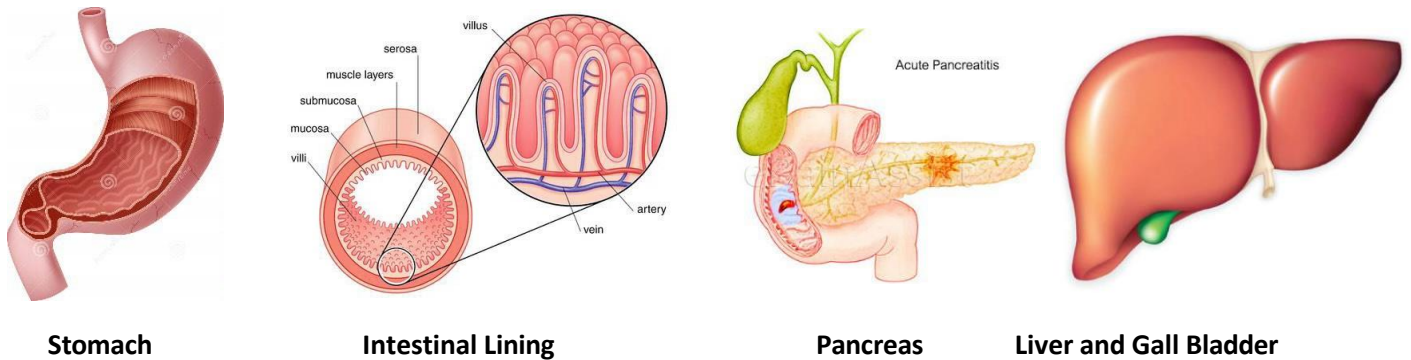
Under ideal circumstances (proper diet, exercise, and a healthy metabolism) the Spleen produces adequate amounts of blood, body fluids, and energy (Qi). Unusable fluid (“Dampness & Phlegm”), which congests tissues, is **not** produced.



Under less ideal circumstances (highly processed diet high in starches and fats), the Spleen produces inadequate amounts of blood, body fluids, and energy (Qi). Pathological fluid accumulations (Dampness, Phlegm) may occur.

If the Spleen isn’t functioning properly, all of the tissues in the body will suffer, including the organs that comprise the Spleen. A poorly vascularized, poorly nourished intestinal epithelium (or lining) won’t absorb nutrients well. Inflammatory bowel disease (IBD), with malabsorption of nutrients, is a classic example of Spleen Qi deficiency. Individuals with IBD often must have supplementation of B vitamins (B12, or cobalamin) due to their inability to properly absorb this nutrient. The stomach often is upset, and fails to contract properly, resulting in vomiting, or bloating. The pancreas doesn’t produce and secrete digestive enzymes well, exacerbating poor food metabolism. And the liver,

normally well perfused with blood flow, experiences a relative paucity of circulation, contributing to poor metabolic and detoxification functions. For example, the blood protein albumin normally produced in the liver, is commonly insufficient with Spleen Qi deficiency (a state referred to as “hypoalbuminemia”).



Some patients develop *Dampness* with faulty Spleen function. Dampness is an unusable fluid in the body, manifesting as tissue edema, excess mucus, wax, and oily discharges. With intestinal dampness, absorptive surfaces will be too congested with lymph, and absorption will be compromised. The ducts that flow from the liver and pancreas into the small intestine become congested, or ‘backed-up,’ contributing to inflammation of these organs, causing hepatitis (in the case of liver swelling) and pancreatitis. In response to *dampening foods* high in starch, fat, and a high degree of processing, the intestines become inflamed producing mucus and blood, resulting in diarrhea a condition referred to as *enterocolitis*. Most of the inflammatory conditions that veterinarians address in the body are a function of “Dampness.”

Individuals may have different body types and tendencies towards deficiency or excess. Therefore, two dogs may live in



Pomeranians: tend towards Blood deficiency

the same household, and eat the same foods, and receive similar amounts of exercise, yet one tends to be more deficient in Blood and body fluids, and the other tends to be more Damp and Phlegmy. Consider the two breeds the Pomeranian and English Bulldog, each with very different physical characteristics. The Pomeranian tends to be more deficient, especially in Blood. The English Bulldog tends to be more Damp and Phlegmy.



English Bulldogs: tend towards Dampness & Phlegm

In reality, Spleen Qi deficiency may give rise to several different disease patterns in animals. In some cases, Dampness, Phlegm, and Cold develop, contributing to sluggishness and congestion. In others, the Dampness and Phlegm combine with Heat (inflammation) to cause inflammatory symptoms (“-itis”). If the patient is so predisposed, Qi deficiency may lead to Blood deficiency, characterized by dryness of the body, and increasing anxiety. Or, there may be a combination of blood deficiency and Dampness, which is common.

In the next handout in the series, entitled *Treatment of Spleen Qi Deficiency Disorders*, we’ll discuss these patterns, and how to correct them, in more detail.

