# Beware the (not so) Humble Chia Seed

May 19, 2013 By Mike Barr

I always considered myself more or less a *contra la corriente* kind of guy. When food fads come along, I either run the other way or just hunker down until the media storm passes. But this chia seed thing finally got its hooks into me. Dr. Mehmet Cengiz aka Oz, no slave to food fashion himself (well okay, at least in his and co-author CPMC's Michael F. Roizen's print media phase--not so much once he and his producers found themselves having to fill 200 minutes of TV airtime weekly), couldn't seem to say enough about their benefits. And the packet I eventually fell for last week at the corner produce shop called theirs (*black* chia seeds, no less) Health Warrior: for a "faster, stronger, healthier, you." Part of me was curious; the other part, I guess, just weak. I bit. The story was just too good:

"*About five years ago, we read a book about the Tarahumara indians [sic] and their jaw-dropping long-distance runs. Turns out the Tarahumara were powered by chia. We looked into it further and learned that the Aztec Warriors used to eat chia seeds before battle. It was about that time that we had a revelation.*"

"Wow," I thought, "chia seeds for going into battle." *Faster, stronger, healthier you,* kept scrolling through my reptilian brain, like the news headlines on that filthy building at the punto of Times Square. Who wouldn't want that? And at "only" $15 a pound. (Flaxseed, psyllium seed husks, which to my mind chia seeds most closely resemble, even hemp seed, mind you, can be had for as little as 5 cents per pound. But more on that later.)

Dan and Nick had hooked me with their story.

*"We started eating it on everything--salads, yogurt, in smoothies, cereal--and noticed a huge improvement in our workouts, overall energy, hydration levels and satiation. We started working out harder, lifting heavier, feeling stronger, and running farther, faster. We decided a secret this amazing was just too good to keep to ourselves. We hope it changes your lives like it changed ours."*

We'll forgive them the mistaken choice of conjunctive adverb in their closing pitch. And who knows, maybe the ancient Aztecs did really work harder, lift heavier, run faster and farther. But on chia seeds? Really? (I have since found out that the plant that grows from them is a member of the mint family!)

Where were the chia seeds' (*Salvia hispanic*: turns out there are a million varieties!) talismanic powers when HernÃ¡ndo CortÃ©s breezed in to Tenochtitlan (with a mere 500 men) that fateful

day in 1519? (Maybe we should find out what the Tlaxcalans were doing before battle!)

Bottom line. There was no miracle. Yes, the seeds do quickly dissolve (which if you think about it is kind of weird: how does the plant then propagate?) into some lovely or disgusting (depending on your interpretation) mucilaginous goo--much the same way that psyllium seed (but the husks--not the seeds) do. Within a mere 12-24 hours your tubes are lubed like never before. Box up the TP rolls and store them in a cool, dry place. Nice, but nothing cheaper hygroscopic cellulose materials wouldn't do.

By Day 3 I noticed the skin on the top of my hands was smoother, but I had also noticed this effect (even more remarkably--my elbow tips became smooth as proverbial baby's bottom) when I began taking flaxseed oil (even gelcaps) many years ago. So again, nothing unique to chia.

Then came the moment of truth: my borderline fine reading vision PLUMMETED. About the same time I noticed luxuriant skin, I could no longer read small print--even if shuttled to brighter light. Wtf?? Should I rush to an eye specialist? (Seriously, for the first few days I was genuinely worried: how could my precariously teetering peri-presbyopia have deteriorated to whole hog friggin' bifocals in the space of a week? In a word: Dampness.

(It is the convention to capitalize these East Asian medicine concepts: Damp, Phlegm, Cold, Heat, even Blood, so as to distinguish them from the western understanding of these words. The TCM/East Asian medicine use of these terms is similar to the western understanding but often either broader or more specific. (Honestly, I still cannot quite figure out what they mean when they speak of "Blood." It is neither the red (or blue) stuff we recognize as coursing through our vessels and organs nor is it a magical mixture of this and other unquantifiable forces. At a certain point, we just resign ourselves to not understanding!) Also, I am still looking for a good reference to explain their concept of Dampness. This is the best I can find for now. I will keep looking--and welcome suggestions.)

I know it sounds crazy. And when my Chinese MD TCM professor at my (first) SoCal acu school (currrently in Chapter 11) proposed it--as happening to her--it seemed outlandish. She explained that she frequently noticed vision changes early in the week after eating ice cream (or alcohol) over the weekend. Could it be? After all, isn't middle to late age presbyopia solely explained by diminished refractive potential of the lens of the eye due to the loss of elasticity that naturally accompanies aging?

And that's why I thought it important, necessary, useful to write about the potential Dampness aggravating effects of chia seeds (Yes, an "N of 1," but multi-centered RCTs have to start somewhere!)

Even the most healthful American diets are, from the perspective of East Asian medicine, chock full of Dampness creating habits and foodstuffs: salads, raw foods (alfalfa sprouts, on the other hand, and presumably all sprouts, at least according to Will Maclean, are said to help drain dampness), pasteurized or reconstituted juices (especially fruit juices), smoothies (especially if banana is used as base), cheeses, nut butters, nut-based milk substitutes, wine, beer, spirits. (This

is not meant to counsel avoidance of these items, merely awareness, knowledge of (theoretical) effects on your body, and judicious selection of amounts and/or timing for inclusion in your diet. There is a thoughtful article and cautionary tale (mostly geared to practitioners) on the dietary "avoidance problem," also at itmonline.org.)

East Asian medical theory seems to view all antiviral (and antibiotic) medications as energetically "Cold." So anyone getting out of the hospital after a course of IV antibiotics or, presumably, anyone taking HIV meds or HSV meds or HBV meds long-term would be exposing the energy of her/his body to a constant onslaught of Coldness. (This is said to explain many of the side effects of these medications. It would also explain why some people experience more side effects from the same medications whereas others experience fewer side effects--or none at all.) Would this "exogenous Cold" predispose that same person to the accumulation of Dampness? In terms of disrupting or blocking the "qi mechanism" of the body, at least accord to East Asian medical theory, it seems that it well might.

The idea of Damp (and my all-time fave, Phlegm) is, quite possibly, the singular most important contribution East Asian medicine has made to the western world. I will try to explore it in greater detail in a later post (or you can read Paul Pitchford or itmonline and other sources for your own edification), but basically it's moisture (or even gook) in your body where it really shouldn't be. Pathological, well, *dampness*. (Not to be confused with water retention; even Chinese medicine knows what edema is.) The highly regarded Australian-based TCM guru, Steven Clavey, has written a book called Fluid Physiology and Pathology in Traditional Chinese Medicine, which goes into more depth than you might care to know about these topics.

The challenging (sometimes maddening) part of this, at least for me, is that all of this talk of Dampness and Damp-causing foods (or preparations) is that we pretty much have to take all of this whacky East Asian medical theory as an article of faith. Dampness in the body cannot be measured, per se, and claims for this or that food or preparation either "creating Dampness" or "draining/drying" Dampness in the body can really only be, sort of, tested or proven if the person/patient begins feeling better (some practitioners will use visual inspection of tongue, palpation of radial pulses, and questions about "feeling heavy" and other subjective symptoms to try to suss this out) or--best of all worlds--*recovers* from an ailment after adopting measures (or undergoing acupuncture and/or herbal medicine treatment) to rid the body of the Dampness. (Of course, there really is no way to know if the recovery would have happened anyway: one of my most trusted physician friend's default quip is, "Time heals everything." While I don't actually believe this--because I have also seen "time" both entrench and worsen the suffering of conditions--it does seem like a good general rule of thumb: to consider all possible explanations for improvements in well-being so as to stand a better chance of honing in on exactly what might be (and likely is *not*) responsible for the effect. This is how we advance our understanding and clinical skills, after all, isn't it? Humility in alternative medicine practitioners (and, I suppose, many medical doctors--but nearly none of the ones I know) seems all too rare these days, at least from many of those I have witnessed in action.)

The antidote to Dampness, according to East Asian medicine theory, is regular (i.e., daily--even if

only very small portions) consumption of dampness draining foods like adzuki beans (also sometimes labeled aduki and azuki), pearl (but not, apparently, “pearled”) barley--both our kind and the East Asian kind: Job’s tears, (I would add short grain brown rice to this list) as well as (according to East Asian understanding), lightly *sautÃ©eing* (in lieu of consuming your greens raw) dark, bitter greens (Swiss chard, mustard or dandelion greens, kale, arugula, Bok choi, maybe even spinach come immediately to mind) Moving your body (that is, moving your *qi*--which I thought I was doing adequately, but school/work/life schedules have a way of overtaking even the faithfully arranged exercise plans) is also key: long walks (preferably unaccompanied--alone with your thoughts, observations and/or personal soundtrack, and absolutely *sans* cellphone or other communication device), swimming, biking, running, dancing, gymnastics, competitive sports, Tai Chi, martial arts, breathwork, reflective stretching, bending, twisting (Ã  la many yoga practices). Again, Pitchford is a good source for more information on this. As is careful navigation of the internet generally.

A relatively famous acupuncturist, researcher and author in New Zealand, Debra Betts, writes, conversely, that nuts such as almonds and walnuts are actually *helpful* in getting rid of dampness--and phlegm in particular. Shy of short circuiting, all I can do is just smile surrenderingly and scratch my head, apologizing awkwarding to family members, friends and patients alike for the maddening inconsitency of published dietary guidelines in Chinese or Asian medical theory. (If only the inconsistency ended there...)

There are acupuncture points on the body (on all limbs and 1-2 on abdomen and sacrum) reputed to help with “draining” Dampness from the body. Likewise, there are a half dozen of centuries old herbal formulas (broths) with the sole design of doing this.

On the train ride back from the Fortune Society yesterday (“Building People Not Prisons”), I discussed this with a few of my cracker jack colleagues. It was posited that mucilaginous substances like chia seeds would be expected to *remove* Dampness from the body rather than cause it. After all, psyllium seed husks seem to have this effect. So the plot thickens. “I think it’s all what your body does with what you eat,” an especially insightful classmate argued. Maybe my observation is way off the mark. Could the problem have been that I was putting the little black seeds into my blueberry banana soy smoothie? Or that I had also recently begun drinking this pre-made chocolate protein (30g per serving) drink once daily?  Maybe I already had so much Dampness going on (the teacher I trust the most regularly reminds us that we all--even the 20-somethings among us--have varying degrees of Yin deficiency, Qi stagnation and Dampness) and this just tipped the balance into overt pathology. I welcome hearing of others’ experiences and observations.

My response was to suspend, for now, all three suspect eating habits: chia seeds, banana-soy-berry smoothie, (whey) protein drink and, for science’s sake, will try the chia seeds again (after a 1-week wash-out period)-- without the confounding variables.

In the meantime, I will look into a new breakfast routine, perhaps having Job’s tears and Chinese yam porridge instead of bananas, chia and soy. In addition, I will look into one of the classic

“Dampness draining” herbal formulas--probably in pill or capsule form. The one that most fascinates me currently is one whose ministerial level ingredients are two fungi reputed to possess an array of immune-enhancing, anti-inflammatory, hepato-protective and even anti-cancer properties: *Wolfipori extensa* and *Polyporus umbellatus*. Wolfiporia extensa is also known as *Sclerotium Poria Cocos* (Fu Ling in romanized Pinyin) and is sometimes called Tuckahoe or “Indian bread,” allegedly because Native Americans are said to have used it as food in times of scarcity. Ah, back to the native ’indians’ of the Americas again. I guess everything comes full circle.

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