

Chapter-08

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF DIET IN UNANI MEDICINE: A COMPREHENSIVE PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Unani medicine encompasses a comprehensive approach to health, drawing from various traditional systems of medicine and incorporating insights from Ayurveda, Persian medicine, and Chinese medicine. This diverse heritage has contributed to the development of Unani medicine's unique approach to diet and its significance in maintaining overall well-being.

1. INTRODUCTION

Unani medicine, also known as Yunani or Greco-Arabic medicine, is an ancient holistic healing system with roots in ancient Greece and the Arab world. It has been in use for centuries in various parts of the world, including South Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa. Unani medicine is centered on the principles of balance and harmony within the body, and it considers diet as a fundamental element in maintaining and restoring health. In this article, we will explore the significance of diet in Unani medicine, its principles, and its role in maintaining a healthy and balanced life.

2. BASIC PRINCIPLES OF UNANI MEDICINE

Unani medicine is based on a set of fundamental doctrines that guide its approach to healthcare.

These principles include:

- a. **Tabiyat (Nature):** According to Unani principles, the human body has an innate ability to heal itself, which is mentioned as "tabiyat." A balance of the body's natural faculties and humors is crucial to support this self-healing process (*Ahmad SI, 1980*).
- b. **Mizaj (Temperament):** Every individual has a unique temperament, or mizaj, that influences their susceptibility to diseases and their response to treatments. Understanding an individual's temperament is crucial in determining an appropriate diet and treatment plan.
- c. **Akhlat (Humors):** Unani medicine recognizes the presence of the four humors in the body, with each individual having a specific proportion of these humors. Diet plays a vital role in maintaining the balance of these humors (*Razi, 2000*).
- d. **Arkan (Elements):** The human body is composed of various elements, and maintaining the equilibrium of these elements is essential for good health (*Kabiruddin 1930*) Unani medicine takes into account the elemental composition of foods when prescribing diets.

- e. **A'zā (Organs):** The body's organs are interconnected, and any imbalance in one organ can affect the functioning of others. A proper diet is necessary to support the well-being of all organs and systems.

3. ROLE OF DIET IN UNANI MEDICINE

In Unani medicine, the significance of diet is paramount. Researches have shown that diet is considered a cornerstone of health, and the food we consume is believed to have a direct impact on the body's humoral balance, temperament, and overall well-being (*Mia Maria et al, 2018*). Some key facets of the role of diet in Unani medicine:

- a. **Determining Mizaj (Temperament):** As mentioned earlier, each individual is believed to have a unique temperament or mizaj. Unani practitioners assess a person's temperament based on their constitution and the balance of humors in their body. This assessment guides the selection of an appropriate diet that aims to restore or maintain the individual's natural equilibrium.
- b. **Balancing Humors:** The primary objective of diet in Unani medicine is to balance the four humors within the body. Depending on an individual's constitution and the presence of any humoral imbalances, specific dietary recommendations are made. For example, if someone has an excess of yellow bile (Safra), their diet may be adjusted to reduce foods that increase this humor.
- c. **Enhancing Digestion:** Unani medicine emphasizes the importance of strong digestion for overall health. A well-balanced diet helps support optimal digestive function, which is seen as vital for the proper assimilation of nutrients and elimination of waste products.
- d. **Promoting General Well-Being:** A balanced diet in Unani medicine is not only about treating diseases but also about maintaining overall well-being. It includes recommendations for daily dietary habits that can contribute to a long and healthy life (*Ansari AP et al, 2018*)

4. CLASSIFICATION OF FOODS IN UNANI MEDICINE

In Unani medicine, foods are classified based on their effect on the body's humoral balance and temperament. The classification of foods is as follows:

- a. **Hot and Cold:** Based on their thermal characteristics, foods are classified as either hot (har) or cold (sard). People with a cool disposition are typically advised to eat

hot foods since they are thought to raise body temperature. Conversely, cold meals have a cooling effect and are best suited for people with hot dispositions.

- b. **Wet and Dry:** Wet (barrid) and dry (yabis) foods are classified based on their moisture content. Wet foods are believed to increase bodily fluids, making them beneficial for individuals with dry temperaments. Dry foods are suggested for those with excessive wetness.
- c. **Humid and Astringent:** Some foods are considered humid (raziq) as they have a moistening effect, while others are astringent (jafif), helping to reduce excess moisture. The choice between these foods depends on the individual's temperament and humoral balance.
- d. **Soft and Hard:** Foods can also be classified as soft (labeed) or hard (qasir) based on their texture. Soft foods are considered milder on digestion and may be suitable for individuals with weak digestive systems.
- e. **Nutritive Value:** Foods are evaluated for their nutritional content, with an emphasis on their impact on the body's humoral balance. For example, foods rich in nutrients that contribute to the maintenance of a balanced temperament are favored.
- e. **Dietary Guidelines in Unani Medicine:**

Unani dietary guidelines are highly customized, taking into account a person's temperament and any existing humoral imbalances. Ibn-e-Sina has emphasized that the most of the diseases are only caused by persistent mistakes in diet and exercise (*Usama et al, 2020*) Here are some general dietary recommendations based on Unani principles:

- a. **Moderation:** Unani medicine advocates for moderation in all aspects of life, including diet. Overindulgence in any type of food can lead to an imbalance in the humors and cause health issues.
- b. **Fresh and Natural Foods:** Fresh, natural and unprocessed foods are preferred in Unani medicine. These foods are believed to have a more favorable impact on the body's balance.
- c. **Balanced Proportions:** A diet should include a balanced proportion of the various food categories, such as grains, fruits, vegetables, proteins, and fats. The goal is to achieve a balance of hot and cold, wet and dry, and other opposing qualities in the diet.

- d. **Seasonal Variations:** Unani practitioners consider the seasons and climate when recommending diets. Foods that are in season are often seen as more suitable for consumption.
- e. **Meal Timing:** Eating at regular intervals and in accordance with the body's natural rhythms is encouraged. Skipping meals or eating irregularly can disrupt the body's equilibrium.
- f. **Dietary Restrictions:** Certain individuals may be advised to avoid or limit specific foods based on their temperament and humoral balance. For instance, someone with a hot temperament may be advised to reduce the consumption of hot and spicy foods.

5. SPECIFIC DIETARY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMMON AILMENTS

In addition to general dietary guidelines, Unani medicine provides specific dietary recommendations for various common ailments and health conditions (*Qureshi EH, 2006*). These recommendations are tailored to address the underlying humoral imbalances and temperament of the individual. Some examples of dietary recommendations for common ailments include:

- a. **Digestive Disorders:** For individuals with weak digestion, easily digestible and soft foods are recommended. Foods with cooling properties may be suggested to alleviate excessive heat in the stomach.
- b. **Fever:** During a fever, hot and spicy foods are usually avoided, and cooling foods and beverages like cucumber, melon, and yogurt may be recommended.
- c. **Obesity:** To address obesity, a diet that includes foods with astringent and drying properties is often suggested. Reducing the intake of sweet and fatty foods is also emphasized.
- d. **Hypertension:** For individuals with hypertension, a diet low in salt and rich in foods with cooling properties can be beneficial. This helps in reducing the heat in the body and maintaining blood pressure.
- e. **Diabetes:** Unani medicine recommends dietary modifications for individuals with diabetes, with an emphasis on foods that help balance blood sugar levels and reduce excessive heat in the body.

6. THE ROLE OF DIET IN PREVENTATIVE HEALTHCARE

Unani medicine places significant importance on preventative healthcare. A well-balanced diet, aligned with an individual's mizaj, is seen as a fundamental component of maintaining good health and preventing diseases. By following dietary guidelines that suit their temperament, individuals can reduce the risk of humoral imbalances and related health issues.

The preventative aspect of Unani dietary recommendations includes advice on maintaining a strong immune system, promoting longevity, and enhancing the body's natural ability to resist diseases. A diet that supports overall well-being and keeps the humors in balance is thought to be a key factor in achieving a long and healthy life.

7. MODERN SCIENTIFIC INSIGHTS AND UNANI DIETARY PRACTICES

While Unani medicine has been practiced for centuries, its dietary principles align with many modern nutritional recommendations. Science has shown that a balanced diet with a variety of nutrients is crucial for maintaining health and preventing chronic diseases. Unani dietary practices, such as moderation, emphasizing fresh and natural foods, and considering individual differences, resonate with contemporary nutritional wisdom.

Furthermore, some Unani-recommended foods and ingredients have garnered scientific interest for their potential health benefits. For example, spices like turmeric and saffron, often used in Unani cuisine, have been studied for their anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties. Yogurt, a staple in many Unani diets, has probiotic properties that support gut health. This convergence of traditional knowledge and modern science highlights the potential value of Unani dietary practices in today's world.

8. CHALLENGES AND CRITICISMS

Despite the rich historical heritage and potential benefits of Unani dietary practices, there are challenges and criticisms associated with this system of medicine:

- a. **Lack of Scientific Validation:** Some aspects of Unani medicine lack empirical evidence to support their claims. The humoral theory, while historically significant, is not consistent with contemporary medical understanding.
- b. **Limited Standardization:** Unani dietary recommendations are often personalized based on an individual's mizaj. However, this personalized approach can make it difficult to establish standardized dietary guidelines.

- c. **Cultural and Geographical Variation:** Unani dietary recommendations can vary across different regions and cultures, making it challenging to apply a uniform approach.
- d. **Integration with Modern Medicine:** Integrating Unani medicine with modern healthcare systems poses logistical and regulatory challenges in many countries.

9. CONCLUSION

The significance of diet in Unani medicine is deeply rooted in its holistic approach to health, emphasizing the importance of balance and harmony within the body. Unani dietary recommendations are tailored to an individual's temperament, humoral balance, and specific health needs, reflecting a highly personalized approach to nutrition.

While Unani medicine may face challenges and criticisms, its dietary principles resonate with modern nutritional wisdom and offer insights into the potential benefits of personalized dietary recommendations.

As contemporary healthcare increasingly recognizes the importance of personalized medicine, Unani dietary practices present an intriguing intersection of ancient wisdom and modern science. While the humoral theory may not align with current medical paradigms, the emphasis on fresh, natural foods, moderation, and individualized dietary recommendations holds promise for promoting health and well-being in the 21st century.

Further research and collaboration between traditional systems like Unani medicine and modern medical science may shed light on the potential benefits of these ancient dietary practices.

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