

Chinese Dietary Therapy and the Dao of Nutrition

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The wise ancient Chinese were very much in tune with their bodies and their environment. They lived by the principle of being in harmony with nature and maintained balance in every aspect of their lives, especially diet. Their knowledge and experiences were preserved through generations and further refined into what we now know today as Chinese nutrition or dietary therapy. This is both a healing system and a disease prevention system. The advantage of Chinese nutrition lies in its flexibility in adapting to every individual's need in the prevention against disease, and the treatment of the whole person.

Chinese nutrition uniquely differs from western nutrition in that it determines the *energies* and *therapeutic properties* of foods instead of the analysing the chemical constituents of them, for example:

- ***Celery**, by being cool, sweet and slightly bitter can reduce high blood pressure when eaten regularly and 3 cups of lightly boiled celery juice is consumed daily.
- ***Potato**, a stomach harmoniser, can relieve stomach ulcer by taking 2 tablespoons of potato juice on an empty stomach.
- ***Walnut**, a kidney tonic, can treat impotence when 20 walnuts are eaten per day for a month.
- *incorporating **millet** as a staple can help morning sickness and vomiting, through its soothing quality.

Furthermore, Chinese nutrition takes into consideration such factors as method of preparation, body type, season and one's geographical location in determining the appropriate diet.

Here is a body type example; the latest 'super food' fad the Goji berry, also known as Wolfberry fruit or lycium fruit is a Chinese medicinal herb that has a long history of use over thousands of years. The lycium fruit was discovered by the west and put under the microscope and marketed for having high vitamin C content and its antioxidant and cancer fighting constituents. It is recommended that everyone consume them also to boost the immune. In Chinese Medicine the goji berry is used to strengthen (tonify) the liver and kidney yin or fluids. It is beneficial for those who are often thin and dry and have symptoms such as dizziness, blurred vision, soreness of the lower back and knees. A very plump woman friend of mine was consuming them and could not understand why she felt so heavy and lethargic and she experienced greater bouts of diarrhea and bloating. She was already a heavy damp person and the goji berry kept on building her dampness and fluids.

The following information will give you an understanding on how Chinese medicine has classified and interprets the nature of food and how it interacts within our bodies.

Food and the elements of climate

According to TCM; *damp, heat, wind, cold* and *dry* are the environmental elements that cycle with the seasons and create our weather. These same elements exist within the body at any time of year. What happens inside our bodies is influenced by the weather and the effects of the seasons, and also by our food intake, genetic makeup, body type and emotional and mental well-being. So to have a balanced diet we need to consider our body and the effects of the environment.

Energies of Food

Different foods have different natures or capacities to generate different temperatures within the body and these can affect our internal organs and their balance. Foods are selected according to their energetic qualities such as *warming, cooling, drying* and *lubricating*. Thus, Chinese nutrition would seek to warm the coldness, cool the heat, dry the dampness, and lubricate the dryness and so forth. The nature of food isn't necessarily connected to the temperature of food at the time of consumption, and it is the food's nature that

has a more lasting effect on our internal temperature. Warm and hot foods warm the body; cool and cold foods have the opposite effect.

For example alcohol can be full of ice blocks, but still due to its nature will heat us internally.

Most people do best by consuming a predominately gentle, warming diet. Cold and hot foods have certain roles to fulfil within the body and should be used in moderation. While many vegetables, legumes are neutral, the cooking process tends to make them warming.

Here are some guidelines on how to guess whether a food may be warming or cooling.

*Plants that takes longer to grow, such as carrots, cabbage and parsnips, are often more warming. Lettuce and cucumbers are more cooling plants.

*Raw food is more cooling than the same food will be after cooking

*Foods cooked for a longer time tend to be more warming

Like the natures of food, our bodies can be hot, warm, cool or cold. Or even a mixture. A person can have heat signs in the upper body such as and cold in the lower body presenting as mild lower back pain, frequent urination and low libido.

Flavours and directions of food

All foods have a flavour. The five flavours of food are *sour*, *bitter*, *sweet*, *pungent* and *salty*. Many foods are a combination of more than one flavour. Eg. Grapes are sweet and sour. Bananas are cold and sweet. Honey is warm and moistening. Once in the body, each flavour enters a different organ. In small amounts these flavours benefit and strengthen their corresponding organs. The salty flavour affects the kidneys and bones and comes from foods such as salt, seaweed and crab. The sour flavour affects the liver and comes from foods such as lemons pears, plums and mangoes. The bitter flavour affects the heart and blood and comes from flavours such as alfalfa, rye and lettuce.

A Balanced diet that takes all five flavours into account does not mean an equal percentage of each flavour. A balanced diet is a diet dominated by 'sweet' foods and includes small amounts of each of the other flavours each day. Sweet refers to most grains, legumes, vegetables, nuts, seeds and fruit.

What determines the way food moves is a mixture between temperature and flavour. Hot and pungent foods move out, sweet and warm foods move up, cool and salty or sour foods move down and cold and bitter foods move in. So why does direction matter? Because seasons, body types and ailments all have particular directions. For example, hiccupping is considered an upward ailment and should be treated with a downward moving food such as an orange or tangerine.

An appropriate mix of the 5 tastes creates a diet that strengthens the bones, makes the tendons flexible, promotes the circulation of blood and qi, and keeps the skin and muscles in good condition.

Eating with the seasons

Each season has a corresponding organ that is more sensitive during this time.

A season for each organ;

Spring- Liver

Early summer-Heart

Late summer-Spleen

Autumn- Lungs

Winter- Kidneys

Each season is also balanced with the awareness of what came before it and what will come after. If you eat inappropriately in one season, you will suffer in that season and you will also increase your health risk in the next season as you will be badly prepared. By eating foods that move the energy down to the core of the body to regenerate and repair in winter, we take advantage of the strength of winter. In the warmer months of the year, we can eat foods that move energy up to support increased activity and elimination (such as perspiration and regular bowel movements) so energy and blood can circulate well.

Even within each season you can respond to specific weather patterns.

Guidelines for a balanced diet

Traditional Chinese medicine believes how we eat our food is also very important. It is very common these days to eat in our car on the way to work, eat at our desk while working or have the television on while eating, this weakens our digestive energy.

It is important to

- Sit down to eat
- Chew food well
- Pay attention to eating, turn off the television, get away from the work desk
- Eat organically and locally
- Eat seasonally
- Do not skip meals
- Stop eating before the 'full' point
- Never eat within 3 hours of going to sleep

The best ways of preparing foods are steaming, stir frying in water, stewing (boiling, as in soups), or baking. Steaming leaves the food in its most natural state, while baking creates more heat and would be the best method for cold conditions.

Traditional Chinese medicine views the stomach and spleen as a cooking pot that breaks down the food that is eaten and turns it into energy and blood for the body. The stomach is the cauldron and the spleen is the digestive fire that warms up the pot. The stomach cooks and breaks down the food, sending the pure part of the food to the spleen to be distributed to the rest of the body and eliminating the waste as faeces and urine. It is important to maintain this digestive fire and too many cold and raw foods can put out the digestive fire, weakening and slowing the digestive system and the assimilation of nutrients.

Follow us on our recipe page with food for the seasons.

Information from;

Medicinal Herbs, Geng Junying et al

Food for the Seasons- eat well stay healthy the traditional Chinese way, professor Lyn Wong

The tao of nutrition, Maoshing Ni, Ph.D