

Traditional Chinese Dietary Medicine

Chinese medicine classifies food according to its energetic effects rather than according to its component parts. Certain foods are viewed as warming and nourishing while others are seen as cooling and eliminating; some foods are useful for building qi while others have blood, yang or yin building properties.

Thus while a breakfast consisting of a banana and yoghurt will always have the same nutritional value in western medicine no matter who is eating it, in traditional Chinese medicine it may be seen as beneficial for those with yin deficiency conditions but detrimental to those with yang deficiency or dampness.

Food in this context either assists or hinders our daily efforts to maintain health or recover from illness, depending on our constitution. It is not just a matter of eating nourishing healthy food but of eating nourishing healthy food that is right for individual body types.

Thus a person's underlying constitution, including the strength of their digestive system, determines what foods are most suitable. At the same time Chinese medicine emphasises guidelines on how food should be prepared and eaten if it is to be utilised in the most efficient way.

The Five Flavours

All foods in traditional Chinese medicine are assigned according to the five flavours: sour, bitter, sweet, pungent and salty and the four natures: cool, cold warm and hot.

The flavour of food (sour, bitter, sweet, pungent and salty) can be used to predict its effects on the body. Many foods belong to more than one of the five flavours, for example vinegar is seen as being both bitter and sour and cheese as being sour and sweet.

The nature of food (cool, cold, warm and hot) also has a direct effect on the body and modifying its preparation can make it more suitable to an individual's constitution. Raw food is the most cooling for the body, requiring more energy to digest than food that has been cooked. Examples of the same food prepared in a different manner are muesli compared with porridge, salads compared with stir-fried and roasted vegetables, or a piece of fruit that is compared with one that is stewed or baked.

In this context a (cooked) potato salad is viewed as more warming than a (raw) green salad but not as warming as a hot baked potato, although the basic qualities of the potato will remain unchanged (that of a sweet flavour with qi and blood tonifying properties).

The five flavours of food with examples

<i>Bitter foods</i>	Such as rhubarb and dandelion leaf, tend to drain heat and cool. Some bitter foods such as rhubarb have a purgative effect as they induce bowel movements
Sour foods	Such as grapefruit and olives are cooling and in small amounts aid digestion
Pungent or spicy foods	Such as onion and cayenne pepper have a warming action, promoting energy to move upwards and outwards to the body's surface. They also have useful properties in dispersing mucus from the lungs.

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Avoiding eating large meals late at night

A large meal taken late in the evening, before sleeping, strains the digestive system, as at this time the Stomach qi is near to its lowest ebb in the 24 hour cycle. Eating late in this way can lead to food accumulation, manifesting with digestive problems such as feeling bloated and full on waking in the morning. Prolonged late eating can lead to chronic digestive problems

Developing regular eating patterns

Irregular eating times and irregular quantities of food are detrimental to an efficient digestive system. While rigid meal times are not required, taking regular meals instead of frequently skipping meals, imposing self starvation or over eating will be rewarded by a more efficient digestive system.

Appropriate fluid intake

A small amount of warm liquid (such as green tea), with a meal can promote effective digestion, but more than one to two cups, especially if chilled, has the potential to “swamp” the Stomach and impair digestion.

Ideally the greater part of the fluids consumed in-between meals should be warm or at room temperature as chilled drinks cool and slow down the digestive process.

Wine, in moderation, has warming properties when taken at mealtimes.

Enjoyment of eating

It is also important to remember that our bodies are designed to enjoy the food we eat. Our tongues are pre-programmed to recognise and enjoy the different tastes and our sense of smell will stimulate the production of saliva. Sitting down to eat breakfast, having lunch away from the office desk and timing the evening meal so that it does not coincide with the TV news can all enhance our awareness and enjoyment of our food and this will also serve to assist healthy digestion.

Diet During pregnancy

During pregnancy women are prone to developing some dampness and heat as a matter of course. This can mean that certain foods women may have previously thought of as healthy, for example dairy foods or orange juice, may contribute to problems by further increasing dampness. Pregnancy may also be characterised by food cravings. It would be pleasing to assume that these cravings were always directed toward beneficial foods and indeed they sometimes are, but this is not always the case. However, even apparently unhealthy cravings such as a desire for fried take away- foods, can indicate a real dietary need, in this case for more high quality fat in the diet. If the craving is for very unusual substances such as clay or ashes it is termed ‘pica’ and thought to be due to nutritional deficiency.

While traditional Chinese food therapy often lists what are considered to many to be strange foods (such as birds nest and sparrow), the adaptation of traditional Chinese dietary principals into a western diet can be straightforward. There is an abundance of everyday foods that can be used without resorting to strange tasting herbs or difficult to tract down ingredients.

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The following information can be used to encourage women to consume foods that they are familiar with and enjoy.

That food effects individuals differently is usually obvious to people, although they may not understand why, for example a person with an underlying yang deficiency will find it unpleasant to drink a glass of iced water quickly, while their friend with an excess internal heat condition will crave drinks straight from the fridge or water cooler. A person prone to phlegm disharmonies may immediately notice phlegm forming in the back of their throat following an ice cream, while others notice no such effects. Or a person with a yang deficiency will enjoy a warm curry, while those with a yin deficiency finds that hot spicy foods can trigger feelings hot flushes.

It is therefore important in traditional Chinese medicine, to help individuals find healthy foods that suit their bodies rather than following set guidelines rather than propose set dietary guidelines that ignore individual constitutional differences