

Chinese dietary therapy. An enduring approach to a balanced life.

The paradigm of Chinese medicine is as foreign to our culture as the language. The language of yin and yang and qi can seem antiquated and simplistic when approached without context. But underlying this complex system of medicine is the premise that all interactions between organisms are fundamentally about an exchange of energy. As an essential part of a complete system of medicine, harmonious dietary approaches are considered a cornerstone to a healthy life.

In dietary therapy according to the principles of Chinese medicine, food is defined by its energetic function; how it causes qi to move, its flavor or expression and its temperature, as described by how it interacts with our body.

The way these energetic properties interact with the body defines our relative state of balance, or homeostasis. Whether we describe food by taste, temperature and energetic signature or by complex chemical interactions at the cellular level, we arrive at a similar conclusion; that the consumption of food means not only the ingestion of caloric energy, but also the uploading of information.

A healthy diet is one of the four pillars of health as outlined in Chinese Medicine. They are:

1. Healthy lifestyle
2. Healthy diet
3. Adequate exercise
4. Cultivating a quiet mind

While the diagnostic paradigm of Chinese medicine is intricate and complex, one of the beauties of the system is that the dietary approach to maintaining health is approachable and appeals easily to the common sense of many patients. It can be outlined as follows:

- Eat in harmony with the seasons
- Eat in harmony with your geography and climate
- Eat in harmony with your phase of life
- Eat in harmony with your constitution
- Eat to promote harmony and treat imbalance - to treat what ails you
- Eat a balance of the five flavors

Within this paradigm, the superior physician is called to use diet primarily to maintain the health of the individual. But it is also true that diet is a therapeutic intervention and area of education to address both chronic and acute illness.

If we look first at the flavor of a food, we can see that each flavor has unique interventional properties. In traditional Chinese medicine terms, each of the five flavors has a function in the body; a 'yang' or 'active' expression of the 'yin' or 'form' of the food. In modern scientific terms, we might say that each flavor governs a specific aspect of metabolic process. By keeping the flavors in balance, the body is better able to

maintain homeostasis and therefore longevity. By extension, the principle of flavor is also used to treat imbalance in the body. While Chinese dietary therapy has more depth than can be explored in this space, some examples (and the accompanying table) provide an overview.

To begin, let us consider some examples of how flavor functions and interacts within the body. In Chinese medicine the sweet flavor is said to nourish the qi. Put simply, foods that are considered sweet provide energy to an organism. The sweet flavor occurs naturally in meat, fish, vegetables, and grains, to name a few examples. It is also stated in Chinese medical theory that an overabundance of the sweet flavor in the diet leads to conditions of dampness. Dampness can be defined on a spectrum, including such mundane and specific symptoms as nasal congestion or as systemically as is seen in obesity. Dampness, when congealed, becomes phlegm in the body. Phlegm conditions include such obvious symptomatic expressions as phlegm obstruction in the lungs, but also more life threatening symptoms such as atherosclerotic plaque in the coronary arteries. In these cases limiting the sweet flavor in the diet and enhancing the diet with foods or medicinal herbs that have qualities that can help resolve the condition of dampness is the antidote. In the case of bronchitis, a Chinese trained clinician would routinely suggest limiting sweet, cold and dense foods in the presence of an acute congested cough and would instead suggest more pungent, drying flavors as antidote or, at the very least, to support medicinal interventions. No pizza and no beer in this case, but a mild broth soup with scallions and a cup of ginger tea to go along with that cough syrup. A good clinician trained in Chinese medicine would never encourage a medicine to resolve a condition without supporting it with dietary recommendations. It is not simply good sense, it is also logically supported within the construct of the paradigm.

When balancing flavors in a meal, one might consider pairing a naturally sweet food with a more pungent flavor as an accent. The pungent flavor, in accordance with this theory, can disperse the qi, and balances the more nourishing property of a food so that it is more easily digestible. It is said to have a drying quality that antidotes the more damp engendering qualities of a sweet food. Think about horseradish paired with roast beef as an example, or wasabi mustard with sushi. When you consider the effect of a spicy wasabi mustard on the sinuses, you can see how this flavor might break up damp or phlegm accumulation in the lungs. The same logic applied to good cooking also applies to good medicine. Too often, the allopathic view misses the medicinal properties inherent in food simply because it lacks the immediate potency of a pharmaceutical. But perhaps when we see this at work in the inverse, it makes more sense. Consider the standard American diet of red meat, sugary foods, highly refined grains and an excess of fat and one can see a clear example of the predominance of the sweet flavor and it's metabolic consequences. A quote from the late Ann Wigmore, a Lithuanian nutritionist, who practiced for many years in the Boston area, sums it up eloquently. ***“The food you eat can be either the safest and most powerful form of medicine or the slowest form of poison.”***

Another example of how flavor works therapeutically in the diet is the bitter flavor,

which is notable in Chinese medicine for clearing heat from the body. Heat in the body is defined more broadly than by fever and runs the gamut from disharmony to pathology in its symptomatic significance. An example of heat expressed symptomatically, as it reflects a disharmony in the body, might be as simple as a dream disturbed sleep or some mild irritability. While these are not considered disease states, they do reflect an imbalance in the body's natural rhythms. A practitioner of Chinese medicine would perhaps apply acupuncture or an herbal remedy, but would most certainly look at the diet for support of harmonizing the diagnostic pattern. She might simply eliminate foods that precipitate too much heat in the body and/or prescribe a diet that included some bitter, and therefore cooling flavors. This could be accomplished simply, perhaps by adding small amounts of bitter greens such as dandelion, endive or escarole, which have a mildly bitter flavor and support gently clearing away heat in the heart. In this view, nature provides us with a convenient way of gently cleansing the system, eliminating the need for complex 'detox' diets that unnecessarily overtax the body's regulatory systems.

To be clear, when viewing the diagnostic category of heat according to Chinese medical diagnostics, one must understand that it is also expressed in symptoms more severe than simple irritability. The trained clinician would, however, be mindful to treat even mild irritability with dietary approaches that would ameliorate symptoms, not exacerbate them. It is said that the superior physician intervenes with diet and lifestyle first and only uses herbs and acupuncture as a last resort. This kind of early intervention is meant to prevent the manifestation of more severe symptomatic expression. Other potentially more severe clinical indications of heat might include such symptoms as red irritated eyes, dark urine, strong odor in the stool and redness or rashes of the skin.

The Five Flavors

FLAVOR	ORGAN ASSOCIATION	FUNCTION	EXAMPLES
<i>Sweet</i>	<i>Spleen</i>	nourishes qi and warms, boosts qi, engenders fluids, relieves pain	rice, meat, squash
<i>Salty</i>	<i>Kidney</i>	softens and descends	sea vegetables, ocean fish, pork
<i>Bitter</i>	<i>Heart</i>	dries and astringes, clears heat, descends qi	espresso, salad greens, celery
<i>Pungent</i>	<i>Lung</i>	disperses qi upward and outward, dries	cinnamon, ginger, mint
<i>Sour</i>	<i>Liver</i>	gathers qi and binds	lemon, vinegar
<i>Bland</i>		leaches dampness, promotes urination	rice

In the Chinese view, temperature is another way in which foods are categorized. A balance of temperature is maintained to harmonize both the internal landscape of the body and the relationship with the external environment. It is important to note that the temperature of a food in this context is defined outside of a numerical measure of Fahrenheit or Celsius. Warm foods include fresh ginger, while dried ginger is considered hot. Tomatoes are considered cold and rice is neutral in temperature. It is also true that the physical temperature of a food, especially foods served cold, have an affect on optimal metabolism. Too many cold or raw foods or iced beverages can inhibit the natural distillation process of food and result in an accumulation of dampness. Instead of washing a meal down with a big glass of a sugary/salty-iced beverage, the Chinese trained clinician would encourage a small cup of warm water or a mild tea. In this view, giving a hospitalized patient iced beverages might inhibit gut motility and extend a hospital stay by prolonging the onset of optimal bowel function.

Therapeutically, foods of a cooler nature are used in the summer months and warm climates to help regulate the body's internal temperature. Tomatoes, cucumber and watermelon are examples of cool or cold summer foods that keep us both hydrated and cool in the hottest season of the year. While conventional approaches to caring for heat

stroke involve chemically compounded fluids, watermelon as medicinal food can be used to help reduce a fever, and rehydrate the body, especially in mild cases of heat stroke. Ideally however, it would be used to prevent the onset of such a state.

The Five Temperatures

TEMPERATURE	FOOD EXAMPLE
hot	dried ginger, pepper, chicken
warm	beef, peaches, fresh ginger
neutral/level	rice, grapes, soybean
cool	pears, spinach, tofu
cold	watermelon, clams, crab, some fish

When applying a food for therapeutic purpose, a clinician must always account for the natural warm state of the human body, especially that of the digestive process. Too many cold foods, either in property or actual physical temperature, will upset the appropriate distillation of food.

Too often hospitalized patients recovering from serious illness are advanced diets that may actually inhibit the healing process simply because the caloric content of a food is confused with the healing properties. In the Chinese view, the process of warm distillation requires that we view the digestive process as an equation. The nutritional value of a food outside of the body must be measured also by the ability of the body to extract that nutrition. In this way we can see that net gain is more important than caloric intake. For a weak patient or someone recovering from a surgery, often a broth based soup, rather than a grilled cheese sandwich will deliver the best outcomes. A soup is, in essence, predigested nutrition that the body can more readily assimilate. The cheese and wheat in this example, while calorically dense, provide a challenge to the body's ability to distill the finest essence of the food and apply it to fueling the healing process. Put simply, with so much of the bodies energy focused on extracting nutritional value, there is less left over for regeneration and repair.

It may be beneficial for an allopathically trained physician to see how the fundamental approaches of Chinese medicine and dietary therapy can support not only the health of patients but may also be a cornerstone in the efforts to treat chronic intractable conditions. Chinese medicine is not a folk medicine; it is a complex and logical approach to providing healing and curing approaches to clearly defined patterns of illness and disease. One may find that adherence to these simple principles offers a physician the opportunity to enhance outcomes in treating chronic illnesses and potentially even reduce costs in treating some acute illnesses.

Sidebar:

Does modern scientific theory support the traditional Chinese view of food as medicine?

Xenohormesis theory proposes that the secondary metabolites in food contain information that can alter genetic expression. It postulates that animals and fungi are able to sense chemical cues synthesized by plants in response to environmental stress and, as a result, respond in ways that ensure their own survival. A common example is resveratrol, a polyphenol produced in response to stress and present in red wine. In studies, resveratrol has demonstrated effectiveness in protecting against cancer, atherosclerosis and diabetes. Chemical messaging in food has been noted to extend to hormone regulation as well. A 1977 issue of Science magazine introduced a study conducted on a colony of mountain voles and demonstrated that by introducing wheat grass out of season, scientists promoted follicular stimulation resulting in the female voles giving birth out of season.

Endnotes

- Howitz KT, Sinclair DA. "[Xenohormesis: Sensing The Chemical Cues of Other Species.](#)" *Cell*. 2008 May 2;133(3):388
- Flaws, Bob [The Tao of Healthy Eating](#), Blue Poppy Press, Boulder, CO.
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ann_Wigmore