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A HOME FOR WOMEN'S HEALTH

Chinese Dietary Therapy

Including the perfect Chicken soup recipe to nourish the blood.



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Introduction

Diet is seen as a form of medicine in many different models of medicine. Traditional Chinese Medicine is no different. Dietary advice is one component of Chinese medicine, the others being acupuncture, herbs and massage.

Good health in Chinese Medicine relates to the energy flow in your body – in a healthy person there is an abundance of energy ('qi') which flows freely throughout the body. We are all born with an innate energy known as 'Pre-birth Qi' which is stored in the Kidneys - this is the energy that allows us to draw our first breath and in western terms can be equated to your constitution. However, this battery has a finite amount of energy stored in it and cannot be recharged, therefore once it has run flat you have no backup. It is therefore advisable not to tap into this type of energy unless absolutely necessary i.e. in an emergency.

The energy we should rely on a day-to-day basis is known as 'Post-birth Qi'. This energy is readily available and easily replenished – it is derived from air and food. Post-birth Qi should be thought of as the electricity supply, and Pre-birth Qi as the back up generator that kicks into action whenever there is a fuel shortage.

Food

It is vital to eat a good diet in order to maintain a good flow of energy in the body thus maintaining a person's health. The saying 'we are what we eat' could not be more accurate. If we eat well, our energy will be abundant and the chances are we will be healthy. If we eat badly, our energy will be low and our body will try and make up the deficit in energy by tapping into our reserves (Pre-birth Qi); this is fine whilst young, but if we over use this type of energy by the time we hit middle age the chances are we will be beginning to feel less than healthy.

Food is big business and eating has been developed into a gastronomic delight – there are readily available ingredients everywhere and thousands of fantastic recipes, so it seems difficult these days to have a truly 'bad' diet. However, it is important to remember that essentially food is energy. We should think before eating 'what does my body need in order to feel well at this precise moment in time?' It is vital to provide your body with enough nutrients in order for it to perform all the tasks you ask of it, and to carry out any repairs that may be necessary. Eating a well balanced, fresh, varied diet is a relatively uncomplicated way to ensure better health and more energy.

Eating an unvaried diet is going to provide a limited amounts of nutrients e.g. by eating a meal with chicken, potatoes, cabbage, peas and carrots, followed by yoghurt and fruit your body will be provided with protein, iron, carbohydrate, vitamin A, calcium and Vitamin C and various minerals, if you eat a chicken burger and chips and chocolate your body will be provided with iron, carbohydrate, sugar, caffeine and free radicals from fried food. This is a very crude example - but you get the picture.

The Stomach

According to Chinese medicine individual foods have a beneficial effect on various organs. The Stomach plays a central role in the body because it takes in the food, breaks it down into energy the body can use and sends it out to the other organs. Therefore, it is of benefit to incorporate foods that traditionally nourish the Stomach. These include:

Vegetables

Carrots, Leeks, Pumpkin, Onions, Turnips, Marrow, Sweet potato, Spring onion

Meat/Fish

Chicken, Turkey, Beef/lamb broth, Cod, Haddock, Plaice

Flavourings

Ginger*, Cinnamon, Nutmeg, Honey*, Barley malt*

* in moderation

You do not need to eat these foods exclusively, but try to incorporate them into your diet as much as possible.

Foods to Avoid

As there are foods that benefit the Stomach so there are foods that are detrimental to it. These include:

- Too much **salad, raw fruit and vegetables** (they are too cold for the stomach if eaten in excess)
- **Milk and cheese** (these are cold in nature and cause the production of phlegm, which hinders the stomach function)
- **Uncooked grains** (these are very difficult to break down and drain the stomach energy)
- **Sugar** (the stomach benefits from a *little* sweetness as it actually helps digestion, but too much will deplete stomach energy)
- **Alcohol** (again, a glass of red wine is fine, it is actually a blood tonic. However, alcohol is essentially sugar, therefore in large (more than 2 glasses) amounts will drain the stomach energy and is also toxic to the liver).

How and when to eat

According to Chinese Medicine, when and how you eat is as important as what you eat. You may be eating the best food in the world, but if you are eating it at the wrong time of day, in the wrong fashion, your body will be unable to benefit fully from the food, and eating may in fact weaken the digestive system.

How to eat

It may be helpful to understand the function of the Stomach from a Chinese medicine point of view in order to make sure you eat in the most effective way – the Stomach can be seen as a large cauldron, heated by a small flame, into which we throw ingredients. It takes these ingredients, cooks them to the consistency of a soup then extracts the energy from them and sends it out to the rest of the body.

However, the Stomach also has several other functions as well as digesting food:

- It sends energy to the head to aid thinking
- It is the organ associated with the emotion of worry
- It supplies muscles with energy to run/walk etc
- It provides the sense of taste
- It makes blood

Therefore, imagine you are eating a meal in a typical working environment:

You grab your sandwich and rush back to your desk to eat it, whilst flicking through your emails and working out how you are going to achieve your deadline by the end of the day.

- Firstly, when we do other things whilst eating we don't tend to chew our food thoroughly (ideally each mouthful would be chewed at least 30 times). This results in large chunks of food ending up in the stomach. As the stomach needs to break food down to the consistency of soup in order to extract the energy, not chewing obliges the stomach to work much harder.
- If you start thinking whilst eating your stomach will have to divert energy from digesting food to your brain to help you to think (obviously your mind does not have to be blank whilst eating! However, trying to workout your next presentation/job interview etc will put stress on the digestive system).
- If you then decide to get up and walk around, your stomach will have to divert more energy to your muscles to enable your legs to work.
- If you start to worry about work even more energy gets diverted away from the job in hand.

In the end the stomach will not have enough energy to digest the food and you do not get the full benefit from having eaten. Added to this, the stomach likes to fill up and then empty. If it is unable to empty due to lack of energy it has to carry the food around – this causes the stomach to become weaker, thus further impairing its ability to do its job.

There are some basic ground rules for eating according to Chinese dietary therapy which will help your body get the most out of the food you are eating:

- Chew your food at least 30 times. Digestion begins in the mouth. If you are under pressure at mealtime, simply chew, and let the chewing relax you.

Thorough chewing turns grains and other complex carbohydrates into satisfying sugars and makes oils, proteins and minerals available for maximum absorption. Whole vegetable foods, especially whole grains, must be mixed with saliva and chewed until liquid to release their full nutritional value. Without adequate chewing you will feel bloated, muzzy headed, gassy and be undernourished.

To help you get into the correct habit of chewing try counting the number of times you chew each mouthful. The average person probably chews anywhere between 5 – 10 times per mouthful. You should aim for about 20 – 30! Put your knife and fork down between bites.

- Set aside time for meals. It doesn't have to be an hour, 15 minutes is enough, but during that time you must do nothing but eat – concentrate on the flavour and texture of your food. You will feel less hungry if you do this.
- Avoid talking about emotionally charged subjects. When you are tense your whole body tenses up – including your stomach – which impedes digestion.
- Avoid eating when too tired, too hot or too cold, worried, angry, standing or before bathing as these activities make the food difficult to digest.
- Relax after eating if possible as this helps your body digest food.
- Try to choose the majority of your foods from local growers. Most areas in the UK now provide organic box schemes which deliver fresh fruit and vegetables from farmers in your area.
- Liquids and foods should be neither too hot nor too cold.
- Drinking with meals dilutes digestive juices and therefore hinders the digestive process. Try to drink only a small amount whilst eating.
- Eat fresh, preferably organic food. Cooked food should be eaten within 24 hours. Cooked food, which is refrigerated and then reheated, is considered wrecked i.e. devoid of energetic benefit. This is one reason why most dairy products – which are pasteurised – are not considered beneficial.
- Avoid using a microwave to cook food. Microwaved food is considered to be devoid of energetic benefit.
- Try to eat according to the seasons. In spring the energy moves up – green, sprouting, aboveground vegetables are most suited to this time. In summer the energy moves out expansively –spices, flowers, leaves and the wide range of summer produce are most suited. In the autumn the energy moves downwards – root vegetables should be the staple at this time. In the winter energy moves inwards – grains, seeds and nuts are most suited to this time.

- Avoid foods that cool the digestive 'flame' e.g. chilled, iced, frozen foods and liquids. All foods should be room temperature or cooked.
- Avoid too much raw food e.g. fruit and salad. Seasonal summer foods are the exception to this rule. In winter all foods should be cooked.
- Avoid greasy, fatty or very spicy foods e.g. deep fried foods, dairy produce, and too much red or fatty meat.

When to eat

In Chinese medicine there is a concept of the body clock. That is to say that every organ has a two hour period within every 24 hours when it is at its strongest – this is when that organ can perform its duties most efficiently and when it is best suited to carry out any repair work.

As Chinese medicine is based in the principles of Yin and Yang, which is basically the concept of opposites balancing each other (Yin = female, cool, night, weak. Yang = male, hot, day, strong) if there is a strongest time for an organ there is also a weakest time for an organ. On this basis, the Chinese body clock is used to identify the best time of day to eat. The strongest time for the stomach is from 7.00–11.00a.m., and the weakest time is therefore from 7.00-11.00p.m.

Eating Schedule

Breakfast should be eaten between 7.00-11.00a.m. It should ideally be quite simple and warm in temperature, for example oat or rice porridge, as these foods strengthen the stomach energy. As these organs provide the body with one of its main sources of energy, breakfast is necessary to 'kick start' the energy production.

Lunch should be around noon or shortly after. This should be the largest meal of the day. It requires more variety of foods than breakfast such as salad, sandwiches and soup. The afternoon is when blood sugar levels dip to their lowest point.

Supper should be the smallest meal of the day (remember food is energy and at the end of the day your need for energy is minimal as you are about to go to bed). It should be food that is easily digested such as soup, steamed vegetables or stir-fry. It should be eaten at least four hours after lunch and preferably before 7pm, as after this time the stomach energy is at its weakest. These days, with long working hours, this is not always possible therefore if you are not able to eat by 7pm try to eat at least 2 hours before going to bed.

Another reason for not eating later than 7pm is because between 11pm-3am is the time of day when the Liver and Gall Bladder are strongest and is therefore the time of day when they perform their tasks most efficiently. They are responsible for clearing toxins from the body and blood and their effectiveness can be hindered when late meals are eaten as it overloads the system.

One indication that the Liver has not had the opportunity to complete the necessary purification is when we wake feeling tired and heavy and our minds are 'fuzzy'. This tends to reflect either habitual or recent overeating, consumption of too many animal products (which are difficult to digest), alcohol, processed foods and/or eating late at night.

(A perfect way to start and finish the day and help the system to cleanse itself is to have a cup of hot water with half a squeezed lemon in place of a cup of coffee/tea/hot chocolate.)

Suggested diet

Breakfast

Rice or oat porridge made with rice milk.

Lunch

Big salad with lemon juice and olive oil dressing (only in the summer months preferably, but if you would like to eat salad in the winter eat it at lunch time not the evening, when the stomach is too weak to deal with the cold energy of salad) plus pasta/baked potato/soup/casserole.

Supper

Smaller portion than lunch made up of: 70% cooked vegetables, 30% chicken/fish/tofu. No salad.

Additional Energy from Breathing

As well as food we derive energy from breathing. Breathing takes energy from the air into the lungs, which then distribute it throughout the body. Everybody knows that without air we would die – however, not everybody realises how much he or she can increase his or her energy levels by simply breathing effectively. Many people are in the habit of shallow breathing where you can hardly see the chest move – this is not an effective way of providing your body with energy.

Upon waking, at moments when you feel particularly tired, at moments when you feel stressed or whenever you can remember, put aside a few moments to take 20 slow deep breaths i.e. right down into the stomach to re-energise the system. (Do not take short shallow breaths or you will hyperventilate which will make you feel faint). Hopefully, you will get into the habit of 'nutritious' breathing all of the time. This combination of good food, good dietary habits and effective breathing will give your body the best possible chance of being healthy. It is as simple as that!

Chicken soup

The following Chicken soup recipe is the perfect dish to nourish blood. Use fresh seasonal vegetables if you can.

Ingredients

- 1 organic chicken – remove skin
- 3 sticks of celery
- 1 BIG bunch of greens (coriander/parsley/spinach)
- 2 carrots
- 1 half of squash
- 1 sweet potato
- 1 onion halved
- 2 bay leaves
- 10 dates
- 6 cloves of garlic – or less if you prefer!
- seasoning of sea salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 1 tablespoon of goji berries – added 15 minutes before the end of cooking
- juice of 1 lemon (to be added according to your taste at the end of cooking)

Cover the chicken with water, add all the ingredients, bring to the boil and simmer with a lid on for 3-4 hours.

The medicinal part of the soup is the broth – you can therefore either drain the chicken and vegetables from the pan and simply drink the broth and eat the chicken separately (the vegetables are best discarded), or you can take the meat off the chicken add it back into the soup with a fresh batch of vegetables. If you like, add some brown rice, and enjoy as a hearty meal.