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Much More than Calories

by Melissa Carr, DTCM, RAc, RTCMP

SAVE

In both traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) “food cures” and TCM herbology, each food and herb is assessed, not by its physical characteristics, but by how it affects the body. This is because TCM practice began more than 3,000 years ago, long before the individual components in food and herbs could be identified and quantified.

Ways to Evaluate Foods

One of the ways that foods are assessed is by their “temperature.” When it is cold out, most people tend to crave warm foods such as soups, hot chocolate, and chili (called Yang). When the temperature rises, we want cooling foods such as ice cream and cold drinks (called Yin). But hot and cold are more than physical temperatures; they are also a property inherent in food that is changed with processing.

Generally, plants that take longer to grow (carrots) are warmer than those that grow more quickly (cucumbers); foods that are blue, green, or purple are more cooling than similar foods that are red, orange, or yellow (red apples are warmer than green apples); and raw food is cooler than cooked food (tofu is very cold, but can be warmed somewhat with cooking).

Taste, of course, is another important factor for food - some might say the most important factor. TCM considers five main flavours (sweet, salty, bitter, sour, and pungent) and one non-flavour (bland). Each flavour has a function and is associated with an organ system. For example, sweet flavour is connected with the spleen-pancreas, for, as we know, sugars do activate insulin production from the pancreas. In TCM, sweet foods also have a moistening function. According to Paul Pitchford, author of *Healing with Whole Foods: Oriental Traditions and Modern Nutrition* (North Atlantic, 1993), “Quality sweet flavour in the form of unrefined complex carbohydrates forms a thin, healthy mucus coating on the mucous membranes.” However, because over consumption of sweet foods and drinks fosters unhealthy mucus and creates moist conditions that promote the growth of yeast and fungi like *Candida albicans*, balanced consumption is essential.

Another thing to consider is that some foods can be evaluated based on their appearance. According to TCM practice, those with acne should avoid too much pineapple because the skin of a pineapple is bumpy and hard, not the look most people strive for. Because walnuts look like a brain, TCM believes they contribute to intelligence. As it turns out, the omega-3 fatty acids in walnuts are brain food. A round slice of carrot looks like an eye: the beta-carotene and vitamin A in carrots are well-known to be beneficial for vision. These principles do not mean, however, that eating peaches or strawberries will make your face fuzzy as these principles apply only to certain foods.

When discussing food and health, it is important to discuss digestion. TCM considers the stomach as something similar to a cooking pot heated by “digestive fire” (think stomach acid). When the fire is low or out, digestion is too slow; but when the fire is too strong, the person’s appetite is insatiable and symptoms such as bad breath and heartburn can occur.

Choosing Foods

Like a fingerprint, no two people’s *qi* (energy) are the same. Everyone is different so, we must choose our foods based on our constitution. A woman with poor appetite who is always cold and has low energy can add more spicy food to her diet than a man with a red face who perspires easily. Also consider the weather and our environment (are California diet trends really suitable for Canadians?). We also need to consider symptoms or illnesses, changing lifestyles and life stages, and allergies.

To emphasize the basics of TCM dietary principles, always remember the concept of Yin and Yang balance. Even if you are always hot, consuming only cooling foods will swing the pendulum in the extreme opposite direction, producing a whole new crop of problems. The same theory applies to flavours. It is important to achieve a balance of flavours, and to do this with good, quality, unrefined foods. When the *qi* of a food is good, the food will taste better and be healthier for the person who consumes it.

Five Elements, Five Flavours

An essential concept of traditional Chinese medicine is the acknowledgement of the five elements - Fire, Earth, Metal, Water, and Wood. Each element is associated with a corresponding body organ system, body function, colour, and flavour - bitter, sweet, pungent, salty, and sour. The following chart highlights the major associations within each element as they relate to diet and health. Examples of foods with the various flavours are listed, as well.

Who to Call

If you want to treat specific health conditions using the dietary principles of traditional Chinese medicine, you are best to seek the assistance of a qualified TCM practitioner. Ask your friends and colleagues for recommendations. Then, when you meet with the practitioner, ask to see his or her qualifications, which should include at least three years of full-time study.

You might also contact the professional association of traditional Chinese medicine practitioners in your province. In British Columbia, where TCM practitioners must be licensed to practise, contact the College of Traditional Chinese Medicine and Acupuncture at ctcm.bc.ca. In Alberta,

contact the Alberta College of Traditional Chinese Medicine and Acupuncture at acatcm.com. In Quebec, contact l'Ordre des acupuncteurs du Québec at ordredesacupuncteurs.qc.ca. For Ontario and other provinces, contact the Chinese Medicine and Acupuncture Association of Canada at cmaac.ca.

TCM is practised in many forms, so read widely to choose the one you're most comfortable with. Taking the time to prepare to meet with your TCM practitioner will help you get the most out of your consultation.

Eating in Season

In traditional Chinese medicine, it is believed that the closer we align ourselves with the rhythms of nature, eating foods that are abundant with each season, the healthier we will be. Just as we spring clean our homes, we can use raw foods to cleanse and cool our bodies in spring. In summer, fruits and vegetables are abundant and their juices and cooler properties balance the heat and dryness of the season. Autumn brings the beginning of cooler weather and it is time to start eating more cooked and warming foods. Throughout winter, warming foods become more important and nourishing foods predominate.

Fire

Flavour: Bitter

Colour: Red

Body organ: Heart, small intestine

Functions: Reduces excessive characteristics (loud, extroverted). Reduces fever. Dries and drains dampness. Induces bowel movements.

Foods: Alfalfa, coffee, wine, celery, bitter melon, hops, romaine lettuce, radish leaf, rye, dandelion, chamomile.

Earth

Flavour: Sweet

Colour: Yellow, orange

Body organ: Spleen/pancreas, stomach

Functions: Strengthens weakness. Moistens tissues. Soothes and calms emotions.

Foods: All grains and legumes, most meats and dairy products, sugar, honey, molasses, apricot, banana, date, papaya, tomato, beet, carrot, cucumber, sweet potato, yam

Metal

Flavour: Pungent

Colour: White

Body organ: Lung, large intestine

Functions: Stimulates digestion. Disperses mucous. Stimulates blood circulation. Some pungent foods like garlic and cayenne help destroy or expel parasites.

Foods: Warming pungent: rosemary, all onions, garlic, ginger, cayenne, horseradish

Cooling pungent: peppermint, radish

Neutral pungent: taro, turnip, kohlrabi

Water

Flavour: Salty

Colour: Blue, black

Body organ: Kidneys, urinary bladder

Functions: Moves energy downward and inward. Purges the bowels.

Foods: Salt, seaweed (nori, dulse), soy sauce, miso, pickles, abalone, clams, crab, cuttlefish, duck, oyster, pork.

Wood

Flavour: Sour

Colour: Green

Body organ: Liver, Gallbladder

Functions: Astringes to prevent abnormal leakage of energy or fluids (urine, sweat, diarrhea, blood). Contracts and firms sagging tissues such as flaccid skin, hemorrhoids, prolapses.

Foods: Lemon, lime, grapefruit, pineapple, pickles, sauerkraut, sour plum, hawthorn, berry, mango, vinegar, small red or adzuki bean, star fruit

About the Author

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