
OPINION COLUMN

Many common foods have roots in TCM

Melissa Carr, 24 hours

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Ginger, a root found in many place around the world, is used in TCM for treating nausea, improving digestion, alleviating coughs, and supporting the immune system, says columnist Melissa Carr. (FOTOLIA)

Most people have heard the saying by Hippocrates, "Let food be thy medicine and medicine be thy food." But the famed Greek physician was not the first to think of that.

Traditional Chinese medicine has been interchanging food and medicine for thousands of years. Some of its medicines are foods that you may already be consuming regularly, while others are ones that you might like to seek out to enjoy more frequently.

Let's start with the common foods. Ginger, a root found in many place around the world, is used in TCM for treating nausea, improving digestion, alleviating coughs, and supporting the immune system.

If you don't like the taste of ginger, but want to boost your immune system, how about some mushrooms? Reishi, maitake, turkey tail and shiitake are just some of the most powerful fungi known to improve immune-related diseases, ranging from the common cold to cancer. You might find these fresh or dried, ready for preparation in soups and stews. Even some of the more common mushrooms, such as button or crimini varieties, have some immune supporting function, but make sure to cook them to get their health benefits.

While in the kitchen, consider some other vegetables that can be added to healing recipes. Scallions are used for relieving congestion, dispersing a chill, and killing viruses and bacteria. Kelp is a seaweed that boosts thyroid function because of its iodine content. The Chinese herb shan yao is a type of yam used to support healthy digestion, treat asthma and diabetes, and boost energy.

With fruits, consider the Chinese herb/food goji, better known as goji berries. High in antioxidants, these dried berries are also used to address dizziness, blurred vision, impotence, diabetes and fatigue.

Don't forget the spice world. TCM recognizes cinnamon as an herb that affects the whole body, improving circulation, reducing edema and relieving pain.

Many spices are strongest at supporting the digestive system. Cardamom and cloves treat diarrhea and vomiting, while fennel seeds reduce bloating and alleviate abdominal pain. Mint is often recommended for those with irritable bowel syndrome as it can reduce cramping digestive pain, but it is also used to treat headaches, fever, sore throat, red eyes and even PMS symptoms.

Though Chinese herbs are often thought of as strange and exotic, some can easily be found in your very own cupboard and fridge. Bon appetit!

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