

“I eat a healthy diet”. As a Chinese medicine practitioner, I hear this statement often in response to questioning patients on their food choices. But what is a healthy diet? You might be surprised at the answer. For a Chinese medicine practitioner, a traditional ‘healthy’ diet is very different than the modern food choices recommended on television and in magazines. The Chinese Medicine diet is based on energetic principles to encourage balance, clean burning digestion, and a well functioning body, free of disease and full of energy.

In Chinese Medicine training, we learn how to restore balance in your body when it has become imbalanced and is now manifesting pain or disease. Chinese Medicine can use needles or herbs to achieve this balance, but also includes a wide range of tools such as qi gong, tai chi, and dietary therapy. While these methods can heal disease by fixing imbalances, the main key is not allowing your body to become imbalanced in the first place. As a patient, you hold this valuable key in your hand every day. It’s called ‘the fork’.

This article covers some basic principles that will help the majority of people eat in a more balanced way, but does not paint the full picture of Chinese Medicine dietary therapy. Chinese Medicine dietary therapy is a complex practice that identifies and treats the underlying patterns of imbalance that are driving your symptoms. Yet, every human body has some basic requirements in common and Chinese Medicine dietary therapy starts with these basics in mind. It is my intent to help you choose more balancing foods based on these common energetic principles so you can create a foundation for healthy living.

DAMP PRODUCING FOODS

Eating for balance has been a way of life for the Chinese for thousands of years. The concept of balance is ingrained in their cultural choices of what to eat and when to eat it. The Chinese diet includes well known spices such as ginger and common foods such as pearled barley. Ingredients are chosen for their medicinal value, as well as for nutrition and taste. The Chinese have long known that ginger helps with digestion and barley helps to drain dampness. Choosing herbs and spices that encourage proper digestion is easy to understand. But the Chinese diet aims for another principle unfamiliar to most Westerners, and that is: draining dampness.

DAMPNESS

Dampness is a by-product of eating foods that clog the free flow of energy inside your body. Popular foods such as cheese, yogurt, white flour, and sugar are all culprits in the formation of dampness. Dampness causes stagnation which creates blockages in the body, causing it to break down and resulting in pain and disease. Signs of accumulated dampness include mucus in the nose or lungs, digestive problems such as loose stools and constipation, excess weight, and swollen joints. Some common Western diseases that are associated with dampness include chronic allergies and arthritis. Dampness is difficult to treat once it accumulates so we want to eat in a way that prevents dampness from forming in the first place.

MEET YOUR DIGESTIVE SYSTEM

It is helpful to examine how dampness is formed. Have you ever thought about how food is processed inside your body? For over 2,000 years, the Chinese have observed the digestive process and declared

proper digestion the cornerstone of the Chinese Medicine system and the foundation of good health. The digestive system is where the accumulation of dampness begins.

When food enters your mouth, it travels through your stomach and intestines. Here, energy is extracted from the food and the waste products are expelled at the other end. The food energy that was extracted becomes your essential life force, providing the fuel you need to live every day. Digestion should be an unnoticeable event. Your digestive system should be quiet and clean burning to extract the most nutrition and energy from your food. 'Clean burning' is likened to metabolism. If you properly metabolize the foods that you ingest, the food is efficiently used and there is no leftover residue after the waste is excreted. If the system becomes clogged, however, the energy does not get adequately separated from the foodstuffs and although you excrete wastes, there is leftover residue that sticks to various places within the body. This residue is considered 'dampness' and affects your body's functions in various ways.

Accumulated dampness clogs organs such as the lungs, causing allergies or asthma. When it clogs the digestive tract, indigestion or bowel problems can develop. Damp can also be 'hidden' and block meridians (the channels we use in acupuncture treatment that carry life force) leading to pain and stiffness or even swollen joints. Over time, dampness can become warm and create the diseases of inflammation such as diabetes, high cholesterol, and high blood pressure. Understanding and addressing dampness is one of the keys to treating disease in Chinese Medicine. Because it is so difficult to remove once it has accumulated, you can see the importance of not letting this dampness develop in the first place.

How do we choose foods that prevent dampness, facilitate good digestion, and allow free flowing energy? Here's where the wisdom of selecting foods based on their energetic properties comes in. This is simpler than you may imagine. Foods that can be found in any grocery store form the foundation of the healthy Chinese Medicine diet.

THE CHINESE MEDICINE DIET

What types of food does the Chinese Medicine diet recommend? Think of the typical menu you've seen in Chinese restaurants. The meals are built around steamed rice, cooked vegetables, and small quantities of animal protein or beans. In higher quality Chinese restaurants, the amount of cooking oils used will be low. If you skip the deep fried choices and those made with flour products (think dumplings and wheat noodles), you have the basic Chinese Medicine diet – a diet that has been created to maintain balance in the body at any age.

VEGETABLES

Have you ever noticed the quantity of vegetables on a typical plate of Chinese food? You are usually served a heaping plate of lightly cooked vegetables when you order a dish that includes vegetables in a Chinese restaurant. Vegetables play a major role in draining dampness and are packed with life giving nutrition. A variety of colors and textures create a combination that is both pleasing to the eye and to the palate. Taste and texture plays an important role in regulating appetite. A wide variety ensures satiety, so you feel full. Varied colors provide a broad array of nutrients and antioxidants to promote health and longevity. Your plate should begin with a large quantity of lightly cooked vegetables. A good guideline is to fill half your

plate with vegetables. You will want to include lots of leafy greens as these are one of the most balancing and nutrient dense foods you can eat.

RICE

Rice is a balanced food which is easily digested. In my allergic patients, rice is the number one hypo-allergenic food I recommend to help them with their symptoms while undergoing allergy treatments because it is so gentle to the digestive system. White or brown rice are interchangeable depending on which one digests most easily for you. White rice tends to be more cleansing while brown rice is considered more nourishing. Rice is a 'clean burning' food in Chinese Medicine which also gently drains dampness from the body. Rice should fill one quarter of your plate.

PROTEIN

Small quantities of animal protein or beans are included in the Chinese diet. The animal proteins are 'building' foods and can be difficult to digest hence the emphasis on 'small'. A serving size of animal protein is typically 2-4 ounces 3-4 times per week. Beans can be eaten more often as they absorb dampness and provide fiber and protein. Your protein choice should fill the other quarter of your plate.

NO COLD RAW FOOD

One food you won't find on the Chinese Medicine diet is raw, cold food. This includes salads and chilled food, iced drinks, and frozen foods. Cold, raw foods are culprits in the formation of damp because it is difficult for your body to process them. In order for your digestive system to extract the essence of food, it must ensure the food is approximately body temperature before it can begin breaking it down. Heating the food inside your body strains your energetic resources, weakening your energy system over time. Lightly cooked vegetables and well cooked grains allow your digestive system to immediately begin extracting energy without first having to heat the food to body temperature. Even though raw foods such as those found in salads contain slightly more enzymes and nutrients, the net gain is less than that of cooked vegetables as you lose energy to the internal heating/cooking process while trying to assimilate these foods.

WHAT, NO DAIRY?

Notice that there is no cheese, butter, or milk on the Chinese menu. One of the reasons is the tendency of these foods to create dampness. Even if heated, dairy's energetic nature is cold and hinders digestion. Chinese Medicine considers dairy to be a building food, only suitable for undernourished people. This makes dairy very stagnating if you are already well fed.

CALCIUM

In a culture concerned about calcium, we have been led to believe that dairy is the only source of this bone building mineral. This is far from the truth. Foods such as almonds, salmon, leafy greens, and broccoli are high in calcium and other minerals that are equally important in the formation of strong bones. Your

calcium needs will be easily met by eating several servings of vegetables per day and adding small servings of salmon and almonds to your diet each week.

SUGAR

Concentrated sweets - like soda, candy, sweetened yogurt, and energy bars - quickly create damp and are greatly over eaten in the modern diet. The flavor of 'sweet' is considered nourishing in Chinese dietary therapy. The majority of foods on the Chinese diet are primarily sweet. By sweet, the Chinese mean rice, animal protein, and vegetables, not concentrated sugars. If vegetables are considered sweet, you can imagine the intense sweetness of a piece of chocolate cake. The sweet flavor of rice, meat, and vegetables benefits the digestive organs. Concentrated sweets such as sugar impair the body's ability to transform food into energy and to transport the wastes for elimination. Incompletely transformed food becomes dampness, accumulating over time to produce blockage and disease.

[Foods are considered to be made of 5 different flavors – sweet, sour, pungent, bitter, and salty. Balancing these flavors in accordance with your individual body type, disease pattern, and season are all part of Chinese dietary therapy. This is a complex subject that can be explored in the book [The Tao of Healthy Eating: Dietary Wisdom According to Traditional Chinese Medicine](#) by Bob Flaws]

SEASONAL EATING

Different seasons of the year require modified cooking methods and different food choices. People naturally eat more warming, heavier foods in the winter, like soups, stews and baked foods. Conversely, in summer we are drawn to lighter, cooler types of foods that are more quickly cooked, like steamed vegetables. Varying your food choices according to seasons is a way to keep your body in sync with the natural environment. Eating warmer foods when the weather is cold and cooler foods during the warmer months keeps you healthy in all seasons.

Likewise, eating in accordance with what grows in your region will keep your body in balance. For instance, someone who lives near the equator where the weather is warm all year around would eat different foods than people who live in cold, northern climates. People in tropical regions would naturally be near tropical fruits since they grow in that type of climate. Those living in the north, say high in the mountains, would never naturally see a tropical fruit growing in their area so should probably avoid them.

One of my favorite herbal educators, Bob Flaws, says that the modern diet is a 'recent aberration in the history of the human diet' that has only developed over the last 50 years. Many modern food choices would not exist in the absence of fast global transportation and indoor refrigeration. If you think about it, humans evolved eating what was locally available and in season. Preservation methods evolved but these methods usually involved cooking. The modern grocery store is like having an in season garden all year; watermelons, pineapples, grapes are always available at your local grocery. But, these are foods you might never find growing in your part of the world and consuming them freely will lead to imbalances over time.

Eating local foods in season is still a common practice in many parts of the world. Indigenous cultures that produce a large number of centenarians (people living past 100 years) have been studied for their dietary practices to find the key to their health and longevity. Scientists have tried to isolate particular

foods these people are eating to find the secret to their long, healthy lives. Many of these studies, however, seem to overlook the obvious fact that Indigenous people have never eaten foods grown outside their region. Additionally, when you view the diets in longevity studies through the lens of Chinese Medicine dietary therapy, there are many similarities between their food choices. Especially noticeable are the larger proportion of locally grown vegetables, rice, whole grains, an absence of sugar or processed food, and smaller quantities of protein than their Western counterparts.

This article has covered some basics regarding the Chinese medicine diet and the concept of dampness. Armed with this information alone, you can begin to make wise choices that will provide you with more years to your life and more life to your years. If you feel inspired and want to eat in a balanced way, please read [Chinese Medicine Foods to Eat](#) and [Chinese Medicine Sample Meals](#) which can help you slowly change to a more balanced way of eating and living.