

CHINESE NUTRITION- ANCIENT WISDOM FOR MODERN TIMES

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The Never-ending Rollercoaster: Our Relationship to Food and Nutrition

‘Am I hungry? What do I want to eat? Is it good for me? What did I just read about what I should eat? What does my body actually need right now?’ Tuning in and understanding our individual journey with food, hunger and nutrition can feel like a full time job. As a Doctor of Chinese medicine, and a woman with my own personal journey around food, I have had countless discussions on this topic. My hope is to illustrate how Chinese nutrition sees us as having unique constitutions and thus specific nutritional needs. Full disclosure, I’m the first one to have my ears perk up regarding a new diet or health fad, that claims to be the next ‘good for you’ thing. Keto, paleo, vegan, raw, South Beach, Atkins, Weight Watchers, food combining, fasting, celery juice, cabbage soup, the list is endless. How many of us were convinced, not so long ago, that the copious amounts of non-fat frozen yogurt we ate was doing our bodies good? Today’s trends lean toward high-fat, low-to-no carbs, low sugar. Even non-glutinous, whole grains are considered to be unhealthy these days. Some of these ideas may have merit, but I for one am getting dizzy trying to keep up with a seemingly endless list of ‘this just in’ theories.

Western Nutrition (What it focuses on and what it doesn’t)

Western-based nutrition, with its emphasis on nutrients, vitamins, minerals, calories and fat, is predominantly focused on weight loss or gain. Western doctors will also make dietary suggestions for people with heart disease or diabetes. Aside from that it’s unusual to have a physician suggest or limit foods in treating a patient. I had a patient who was an eight-year old boy with chronic asthma. He was on steroid inhalers, nebulizers, and couldn’t easily run and play with his friends. His dad brought him to me for acupuncture, and during intake I learned

that dairy was a very large part of his diet. I recommended the boy be off all dairy for thirty days. Almost immediately, his condition improved. Two years later, the child now self-regulates what he can and cannot eat because, without dairy, he is off all his medications and able to play and keep up with his friends without any difficulty. The boy's pediatrician had not considered changing his diet as a potential treatment for his asthma. The same was true for a patient of mine who had been scheduled for sinus surgery. I asked the patient to consider postponing the surgery and try changing her diet for ninety days—eliminating dairy products and other inflammatory foods. Within the first month, her sinus headaches and congestion began to clear. Needless to say, she didn't need the surgery. To be clear, Chinese medicine does not always advocate completely eliminating potentially damaging foods forever, however to cut them out for a specific period of time. This recommendation helps us to notice how our bodies respond to certain foods. At this point we can choose wisely how much and how often we eat things that can negatively impact our individual bodies and constitutions.

How Traditional Chinese Nutrition Is Different

Chinese or Asian nutrition is unique in that it looks at the individual and their patterns. For example, a person who has excess heat wouldn't be given cayenne to boost their metabolism. Herbs and spices that are hot in property would only exacerbate a person's heat, dry out and congeal the fluids in the body. Conversely, someone with excess cold wouldn't be given salads, raw veggies and cold drinks. It would only worsen his or her condition. Food in TCM (Traditional Chinese Medicine) can be seen as medicine for one person and poison for another.

What Chinese Nutrition Treats: How it Works?

When I work with patients they ask with hesitation, 'Do I have to give up coffee or alcohol? Are coffee and alcohol bad for you? Do I have to drink herbal tea from now on? The fact is that there

are few absolutes in Chinese nutrition, We always have to ask the question is coffee, tea or alcohol good for *me*? Tea, even when consumed hot has cooling properties, so if you have a hot constitution tea may be better for you. If one's constitution is cold then coffee maybe better for you than tea because it has a warming energy. If you have a cold physical constitution then liquor can warm you, but if you have an already hot constitution then alcoholic beverages can worsen symptoms. Not everyone has a clear hot or cold patten. Some of us are somewhere in the middle. In addition patterns can change over time and in different environments. These are just a few examples of how Chinese nutrition can help us eat or drink well for our individual needs.

Chinese nutrition can treat hundreds of maladies with food cures. It's a comprehensive and very individualized system of treatment. A skilled practitioner can help you find your diagnosis as well as the best foods for you to eat and avoid. Paul Pitchford in his book *Healing With Whole Foods* says, "With knowledge of how foods act in the body and the ability to self evaluate, one can learn which foods and diets are best for his or her particular constitution and condition. Knowing only vitamin, mineral and general nutrient properties is not enough."

An evaluation is done to diagnose the individual and their particular pattern, then we can prescribe a food plan to manifest ultimate wellness. Food are used to prevent and or treat symptoms and disease.

How Can I Learn What my Pattern is and What's Best For Me to Eat?

I remember first taking a Chinese Nutrition class in university and I was surprised at how simple and intuitive the concepts were and why as a culture most of us were not in tune with and informed by these logical ideas and concepts. An acupuncturist and herbalist can of course help one identify their individual patterns. A pattern is a method of diagnosing by looking at signs and symptoms of the individual. We also look at the foods that most benefit or harm them, but how

can we find these answers ourselves? Books are a good place to start. One book that I'm using as a resource for this article is called the Tao of Nutrition. It outlines the basic ideas of Chinese nutrition and ways to utilize them in your own life. Begin by listing the main symptoms that you have on a regular basis and use those symptoms as a way in to discover your patterns. Chinese nutrition emphasizes the energies of foods. Different energies affect the body in different ways. This relates directly to how nutrition affects our health and maintaining a healthy life. For example, Someone with arthritis may suffer more when there is cold weather. On those days it is better for them to eat foods with warm or hot energy. These foods are very helpful in alleviating the pain due to cold. Conversely, if you have skin disorders which worsen with heat, it is best to eat foods with a cold or cool energy to relieve the symptoms. These are a few nutritional solutions to common problems, and are only approximations. Western diagnoses do not always correspond to patterns in TCM. I have included a few examples, but there are many more patterns and nutritional treatments out there. See my resource guide at the end of the article for further exploration.

Common symptoms and Nutritional Treatments

Symptoms: Fatigue, Bloating, gas, slow metabolism, coldness

Nutritional treatment: lentils, oats, root vegetables like sweet potato, squash and pumpkin, miso soup, orange peels, Foods to avoid include: refined sugar, raw fruits and vegetables, fried or salty foods, cold foods, dairy products

Possible TCM Diagnosis-Spleen Qi Deficiency

Symptoms:, painful periods, menstrual cramps, uterine fibroids joint pain, migraines,

Nutritional Treatment:

Cooked or roasted veggies (mushrooms, eggplant, spinach) Herbs that move Qi & Blood (onions, garlic, horseradish, shallots, leeks, chives, pepper, ginger, nutmeg, oregano, basil, rosemary, turmeric, cinnamon, red wine.

Possible TCM Diagnosis-Blood Stagnation

Symptoms: Anemia, Migraines/headaches, fibroids, menstrual problems, polycystic ovary syndrome, Problems with focus and concentration, Insomnia, depression, anxiety and infertility.

Nutritional Treatment:

Eggs, Beef, Chicken, Sea vegetables, Seeds and nuts, Beets, Sweet potato, Carrots, Leafy greens, Oatmeal, Brown rice, Quinoa, Black beans, Spirulina, Nutritional yeast.

Possible TCM diagnosis- Blood Deficiency

It's Not What We Eat, But How We Eat

Food and nutrition can and should be based on the individual's needs and can be helpful and even curative with skillful mindfulness.

Speaking of mindfulness, what we eat is important but **how** we eat is equally important. If an individual is eating a very conscious and "clean" diet but stressing in a big way, that may be more damaging than someone who is eating processed foods but is eating it slowly and mindfully without freaking out about gaining weight or whatever they are giving meaning to regarding their food choices. Rigidity can lead to stagnation, stagnation can lead to blockages and blockages can lead to disease!

Eating Well is an Individual Journey

We are as unique as snowflakes when it comes to nutritional needs. Anyone who has read books on nutrition or dieting may have noticed that the standards set are those of an "average" or idealized form. They do not encourage the individual to pay attention to the needs of one's

unique self. We are not computer generated clones. If your goal is to feed a virtual body then great, but this is not who we are. We are absolutely unique and individual. There is only one of us. What does that body want and need? We spend our lives trying to meet the standards of outside influences and eventually set up impossible and even harmful standards of behavior that usually have very little to do with what our bodies actually need. Mindfulness with our food and eating is a way to begin a relationship with our true hunger and our most optimal nutritional choices. The further we get from our body's own inner signals the more we tend to force ourselves to make adjustments to meet inhuman and unhealthy goals imposed from outside ourselves. The eating disorder epidemic is just one example of how this can harm us. Our aim is to connect to and cultivate our own inner guidance rather than accept the arbitrary authority of supermarket magazines.

Back to Nature

With all the external influences out there it takes deliberate intention to connect with our true nature. There are ways to reconnect with with the Earth's rhythms. Mindfulness, meditation, hiking or spending time at the ocean are a few possibilities. What's more natural than nourishing one's self with food? All animals use food for sustaining life. Babies eat in and right out of the womb with no worries, concern, criticism or judgement about what they are eating. Eating for nourishment is a very innate and organic element of being human. This we can agree on and it seems rather obvious. This is why it's interesting to point out how far so many of us have come from that elemental instinct. In our modern western society eating, food, nourishment and all that goes with it is a multi billion dollar industry, many of those dollars going toward advertising to try and convince us that their way is the way. As consumers many of us are taken along on this ride We are also inundated with thoughts regarding our wellness, body image, ecological and humane questions. Certainly we are inundated with conversations about what goes into our bodies. Let's do our best to take a breath and notice what **we** really need.

For further investigation on this topic check out the two books that I referenced in this article.

The Tao of Nutrition https://www.amazon.com/Tao-Nutrition-Maoshing-Ni/dp/1887575251/ref=sr_1_1?crid=2P9GVLTXUHMW&keywords=the+tao+of+nutrition&qid=1562603616&s=gateway&srefix=The+Tao+of+Nu%2Caps%2C281&sr=8-1

and Healing With Whole Foods https://www.amazon.com/Healing-Whole-Foods-Traditions-Nutrition/dp/1556434308/ref=sr_1_3?crid=2HMDLL35A6RMG&keywords=healing+with+whole+foods+paul+pitchford&qid=1562603677&s=gateway&srefix=Healing+with+%2Caps%2C190&sr=8-3

In addition, Acufinder is a great referral service to find acupuncturist's in your area and a great site to read articles to learn more about Chinese Nutrition and Chinese Medicine in general.

<https://www.acufinder.com>

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