

Chinese Medicine Dietary Therapy – Shi Liao

Food brings the slowest but greatest changes, and every food has unique properties that can be used like medicine to restore harmony. The holistic lens of Chinese medicine offers simple and intuitive ways to understand the nature of food which guides how we can use it as our greatest medicine. We can nourish ourselves with exactly what we truly need in each moment, and this beautiful relationship with our food creates healthy bodies full of vitality that can overcome as well as prevent illness.

There is no one ideal nutritional approach for everyone at all times, there are endless diets and constantly new ideas of what 'healthy' eating is, how do we know what is correct? We are all different, and our dietary needs are unique, but we can learn to listen to the pattern language of nature and understand how to nourish each unique person with exactly what their body is asking for in each moment.

Shi Liao, or Chinese food therapy is a branch of Chinese Medicine that has used food as preventative and restorative therapy for thousands of years. It considers our unique needs as individuals by taking into consideration our unique constitution (what we're born with), body type, seasonal and environmental influences, and health imbalances. We can understand the properties of foods by the way they exist in nature and by how they taste. When we pair this elemental understanding of food with the holistic nature of the body, we can develop a relationship with food that is enjoyable, intuitive, and healing. People who are cold and dry need warm, moisturizing food. People who are hot and damp need cool, drying food. People with congestion need decongesting food. And people who are depleted need replenishing food. Not everyone will benefit with foods that contain the same amount of "nutrients", there is no universal healthy diet for all people. It's not about the latest superfood diet, rather it's what's locally available, it's the food that our ancestors have been eating forever, it's affordable and it's about what makes sense and feels right, food doesn't need to be so complicated.

While diet changes can be an uncomfortable and challenging exploration, our foods and fluids are the foundation of health and no amount of acupuncture or herbs can bring lasting changes if food choices are constantly shifting the body out of balance. This can be as simple as adding more warming spices in winter, eating seasonal fruit in summer to cool down and replenish fluids, or cooking food longer if there is deficient digestive energy. Sometimes even a simple change can have a profound impact on someone's well being; food choices are essential for vitality and to prevent illness. Not only is a healthy diet integral to optimal health, it is also fundamental to get some physical exercise as well as enough rest. It's also absolutely essential to play, have some fun, and celebrate the magic of this amazing experience!

The basics of the Chinese medicine diet

Instead of viewing meals as a breakdown of proteins, carbohydrates (sugars), and fats, Chinese dietary therapy utilizes the flavors and natures of foods as a guide to a well balanced meal. And maintaining a regular eating schedule is important, typically it's best to eat the largest meal at lunch and then taper down from there. And, of course, it's best to eat local, fresh, organic, high quality foods that are full of vitality (full of Qi). The seasons and changes in the environment have a profound impact upon our well-being, and eating according to the seasons can have great impacts on our health. The main lesson here is to observe your body and its patterns to learn what it needs to find balance.

A typical balanced meal consists of a base of grains and legumes (soaked and properly cooked to allow for easy digestion), with a side of seasonal vegetables that are not overcooked (to preserve nutrients), with a small portion of protein. Some amount of raw greens is great, but also ensuring there are often some lightly cooked dark leafy greens is essential. We may add in some nuts or seeds as well, perhaps add some raw oil

at the end. And a bit of fruit can bring balance too, and a regular yet average amount of seasonal fruit is really supportive too.

Mix it up, make sure you're having a wide variety of quality fresh foods. Eat by color, make it fun, ensure that there is a variety of colors on your plate, this brings so much vitality. Again we must eat in a way that is seasonally appropriate. And the way it was cooked is important too (raw, fried, steamed, etc.), we may add foods/herbs/spices that help balance our unique needs. We create a foundation of the mild/sweet flavor with small amounts of bitter, sour, salty, and spicy to balance out the meal. For example, potatoes and butter are sweet and neutral, but are dense and heavy too, so we may need to add a little mustard or black pepper and some green onions to help balance them out.

Basic natures of food categories

- Grains – Sweet, nourishing, building, consume large amounts regularly (whole grains, not processed white flour). Grain crops are slow growing, are large and help build the soil. Grains last a long time, are full of carbs; they are foundational neutral essence.
- Legumes – They are very similar to grains, but a bit more on the yin side, they are denser, have more nutritional content, but are harder to process. They have more protein, and if meat intake is low, legumes are absolutely vital.
- Meat – Animal products provide essential nutrients we have a hard time replacing. Full of protein and life force, meat helps to deeply nourish our blood, bones, and physical structure. Very dense and nourishing, and on a spectrum from fish, chicken, pork, lamb, to beef. Dairy is especially dense and congesting, and should be eaten in small portions only if it's suitable for you at the time.
- Vegetables – An absolutely essential element to all meals, they help balance and harmonize the foundation of grains, legumes, and meat. Their properties vary greatly, the key is to have a variety of seasonal veggies, a bit of raw and cooked. Never should we only have grains and meat for a meal.
- Fruit – Grows in the summer, full of sweetness and juice that help protect us from the intensity of the summer sun as well as replenish lost fluids. Fruits help cool us down and protect us (they grow in the summer), but should be more limited in the winter.
- Nuts/Seeds – Extremely dense and full of essence, the plant version of meat, they are wonderful to supplement meals with, but should be used in small amounts regularly, and more so in the winter.

Eat according to the seasons

- Spring – A time when life returns after the long winter, incorporate more dark leafy greens to bring nourishment and cleansing after the heavier storage food of winter. Try some dandelion greens, nettle, sprouts, arugula, and kale.
- Summer - Vegetables are in abundance, life is flourishing, celebrate and eat lighter and more cooling foods. Focus on fresh local fruits and vegetables such as peas, greens, spring onions, apricots, peaches, strawberries.
- Late Summer - The environment is drier and harsher, the days are long and hot. Continue to eat lighter but still ensure you're getting enough nourishment after all the summer playing. Fruits help restore fluids well and neutralize the sun's intensity.
- Autumn – The cycle begins to turn inwards, now is the time to begin building up our reserves in preparation for winter. Begin to eat fall crops such as squash, beets, onions, grains, legumes, and more meat.
- Winter – Root vegetables, grains, legumes, meat, and nuts and seeds as they have concentrated food value. Onions, root veggies, ginger, garlic and radish are good options that also keep us warm, we draw on the reserves until the spring comes.

Energetics And Therapeutic Uses Of The Five Flavors

The nature of foods and herbs describes the temperature changes that they cause within the body. Too much hot or warming foods can over stimulate our system while ingesting too many raw or cold foods can slow down our digestive processes. Like all things in Chinese medicine, it is about creating balance and finding harmony within your system, so eating a variety of warm and cool foods can help to create a well-balanced diet.

Understanding the five flavors of Chinese medicine is very important in developing an intuitive relationship with your food choices. It is also important to note that too much of a specific flavor can also do harm. For example sweet foods can help to build, nourish, and improve digestive function, but too much sweet foods can result in weakening the digestive capacity and creating sugar imbalances like diabetes or metabolic syndrome.

- Sweet
 - Nourishes and moistens, great choice for dryness, heat, weakness, deficiency
 - But too much can create dampness, excess sweet causes fluids to stagnate, which easily cause excess weight, and obstructs circulation
 - Grains, root vegetables, legumes, meat, fruit, onions, honey
- Sour
 - Draws inward, think of biting into a lime, for constraint and lax tissues
 - Not helpful if already having overly tense tissues
 - Lemon, lime, vinegar, grapefruit, fermented foods
- Bitter
 - Clears and cleanses, dries dampness, key to remove heat, downward, cooling
 - Too much can be overly drying, depleting, and cooling
 - Kale, collard greens, coffee, mustard greens, dandelion greens
- Pungent
 - Warming, moving, disperses up and out, promotes circulation
 - Can be drying, hot, irritating in excess
 - Hot sauce, ginger, rosemary, black pepper, radish, green onions
- Salty
 - Softens hardness, penetrates,, tastes “minerally”, often deeply nourishing and building
 - Too much salty causes excess dampness and water retention, common in the modern world, limit intake if overweight, tired, and high blood pressure
 - Seaweed, miso, sea food, oatstraw tea, pickles, olives

Tips to incorporate Chinese diet therapy into your daily life

- Listen to your body – This is always number one! The best diet plan is one that works for your unique needs and specific constitution.
- Seasonal eating – Eating according to the seasons is very important as our bodies also go through cyclical changes throughout the year. This is not only about eating fruits and vegetables that are currently in season, but using the nature of foods to bring your internal state into harmony.
- Eating at regular intervals – The earth element (digestive system) loves a routine, so eating at regular times of the day can help assist the gastrointestinal tract to perform optimally. And remember not to skip breakfast or eat more than you need!
- Eat moderate amounts – It is important to listen to your body when it tells you it is “full” or has had enough. Overeating is hard to effectively digest food and assimilate the nutrients.

- Make lunch your largest meal – Breakfast helps to ignite your digestive system and then consume the bulk of your food at lunch when you need energy for the day. Then have a lighter dinner, and don't eat too late so you're not still digesting when it's time to sleep.
- Cut back on the cold raw foods – Too much cold food (especially during winter) can slow down our physiological processes, and creates dampness, and puts out the digestive fire, so a Chinese diet tends to stay away from things like ice water, smoothies and too many raw salads. Opt for room temperature water, slightly steamed vegetables, and if you are craving those crunchy raw salads, have a cup of nice warm soup or bone broth first (unless it's a hot summer day!).
- Go easy on damp creating foods – Such as dairy, fatty and fried foods, and refined sugars, which can slow down your digestion, cause heat, and stagnation.
- Limit sweet intake – Limit excessive intake of overly sweet foods such as fruit and processed sugar as it turns to dampness and obstruction and much more.
- Alcohol – Generates heat in the body, impacts the liver, and causes lots of other issues
- Meat – Meat also generates heat, yet it's essential, just in the right amount
- Eat lots of veggies – Pretty simple advice, fill your plate with mainly fresh lightly cooked vegetables, your body will thank you!
- Cook and eat mindfully – Taking time to cook and eat is important, so slow down, turn off your phone and chew your food fully. You should avoid eating when you are feeling strong emotions or when you are rushed. It is best not to eat while performing other activities such as reading, watching TV, holding an intense conversation or arguing. Mindfulness can help boost your digestion, turn around any unwanted relationships around food and make you feel better all around. This new awareness can also help you tune in to any food sensitivities or foods that may not be best for your body. Try taking 5 big belly breaths before eating, a little prayer of gratitude, and eat in company.
- Get up and move – In Chinese medicine the root of many diseases is stagnation and a lack of movement and Qi flow. So make sure you get your blood moving, daily exercise can help boost your metabolism and improve your digestive function.
- Choose whole, minimally processed foods as often as possible. Organically grown and minimally processed foods have more Qi and are more nourishing than conventionally produced and processed foods. Locally-produced foods and in-season vegetables and fruits are ideal.

Meal preparation

Now it's time to combine these ingredients into a simple meal including complex carbohydrates, lightly cooked, grilled or steamed vegetables (with residual crunch) and a small amount of high quality protein. Root vegetables and grains should retain their shape, texture and nutrients with long, slow cooking. Soups and stews are a great option.

It can be a lot of work to constantly be cooking everything every day, especially when our lives are full, there is never enough time. Devoting a few hours once a week to prepare meals for the week can be a total game changer and can save so much time. You can make a big pot of soup, or separately cook a big pot of grains and legumes and keep it in the fridge and simply add some fresh greens, spices, nuts, etc., and heat it back up for a tasty fresh meal. Making bowl meals can be a great option, just have a base of some grains and legumes, add some veggies, a protein, other toppings, and something to make it yummy! You can even put it all together in a container in the freezer and take out only as much as you can eat in a few days. Make sure you soak and rinse all grains and legumes prior to cooking, as they are slightly toxic unless first soaked. Often legumes are undercooked and are really hard on our digestion.

May you enjoy this deeper relationship with your food, the greatest medicine that nourishes your vitality, helps you transform stagnations, and allows you to reclaim the fullness of your own inner heart radiance.