

Congee – A Nourishing Breakfast for Healing

Congee is a traditional, deeply nourishing Chinese breakfast that has been used for healing since the Han dynasty (206 BCE). Classic Chinese congee is a dilute porridge made with a white rice base in water or broth, with seasonings, and often meat (chicken congee is a popular choice), legumes, and vegetables, but the recipe can easily be adapted to support your dietary preferences and needs. We often use different base grains and ingredients to aid with particular digestive issues as well as larger health challenges. The white rice version is the absolute easiest to process (ideal for weak digestion). We usually seek the most complex version that is still easily digested. Since congee is intended to be a gentle and nourishing preparation, it is cooked for a long time in a slow cooker which does much of the breaking down process that the digestive system usually does. It's a simple and powerful way to support digestion and overall health.

The famous Chinese physician Sun Simiao said that we must first adjust the patient's diet and lifestyle, and only then if the disease has not been eliminated should the treatment progress to using acupuncture or herbs. Congee can be adapted to meet many varied medicinal needs, it is food as medicine, and herbs are frequently added to the porridge which then acts as a delivery medium for herbal medicine. With that in mind, consider medicinal congee as a lovely way to start the day!

In Chinese Medicine, congee is prescribed anytime that the digestive energy has challenges. Digestion is our core foundation of health and vitality as it creates energy and nourishment, qi and blood, which then fuels all life processes. Digestion is often not functioning at its best in chronic illnesses of all sorts, in recovery from acute illness, or simply when we are overworked and regularly living with too much stress. Our digestive processes are often overburdened when we consume more energy than we can sustainably produce. The power of congee is that through the ingredients and cooking process it becomes so easy to digest and assimilate, it is a food of rebirth, and its simplicity feels so comforting in a weary or healing body. When the digestive system isn't operating normally, it can make our minds, emotions, and whole bodies feel out of sorts, it's all connected! And in particular meat, eggs, nuts and seeds, bone broth, beets, dark leafy greens, and dark colored berries will nourish us and build blood the best.

The key to successfully incorporating congee to your daily life is by making larger quantities in advance and keeping it in the fridge or even freezing portions. I like to have all my nuts and seeds in 7 little containers that I refill each week, and just drop this in the pot as I heat up my morning portion. And this can include your specific herbal medicine additions as well. Then I have another container with chopped green onion and parsley that goes in the bowl at the end, make it fast and simple! Use these guidelines to help get you started. As you become more familiar with the process, you'll likely find that you can make adjustments in the recipe to suit your own preferences; listen to your body, what do you need right now and put it in the pot! Maintaining digestive health is a matter of balance, of understanding how the fuels we choose each day affect our vital energies and our food choices either support or hinder a thriving gut, body, mind, and emotions.

Congee Recipe

Use this foundational recipe as a starting place, and experiment with what's right for you (ingredients, quantities, cook time, etc.). When considering which other ingredients to add or take away, you can take the energetic foundations of foods listed below into consideration. As you get more comfortable you can toss the measurements and just get a feel for it!

Measurements: t. = teaspoon, T. = tablespoon, c. = cup

- First soak (this is absolutely essential!) 1 c. brown rice and $\frac{3}{4}$ c. lentils in water with 2 t. of salt for 12 hours (overnight is best), rinse and drain.
- In a LARGE slow cooker or pot, combine the rice and lentils with 7 c. water and 4 c. of broth (32 oz, of your liking, bone broth is best, ask if wanting to learn about making your own broth). Add 1 lb ground lamb, (or pork or beef).
- Add in 2 medium sliced sweet potatoes, 2 big carrots, and 1 large onion.
- Add 10 jujube dates (or $\frac{1}{2}$ c. goji berries, or raisins (though they are NOT the same). (Can purchase jujube and goji from the clinic, jujube is deeply nourishing and so perfect for classic Chinese congee).
- Add 1 $\frac{3}{4}$ t. salt (or 1 t. salt and $\frac{1}{4}$ c. miso), 1 tsp. black pepper, 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ rosemary, 1 t. fennel, $\frac{1}{2}$ t. cumin, 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ t. paprika, $\frac{1}{2}$ t. ginger, 1 t. garlic powder. Yes this is a lot of different things, you can make something similar that feels good to you, use similar gentle warming spices in similar amounts. I make a big jar of this, mix it up, then just put in 7 t. (put in salt separately) for each big batch of congee (simplify!).
- Add 3 t. sugar and 3 T. apple cider vinegar.
- Bring to a minimal simmer, then cook on very low with the lid on, for 4 to 6 hours.
- In the last 45 minutes add in 7 c. of loosely packed chopped cabbage (or a mixture with kale).
- Let it cool then portion it out in large glass containers, keep one in the fridge, and put the others in the freezer. Simply portion out enough for each breakfast, and add fluids if desired when preparing each day. Could even add a bit of butter or splash of coconut cream for extra richness.
- Make a separate mix of equal parts black sesame and pumpkin seeds, coconut flakes, any nuts you like, and simply add $\frac{1}{4}$ c. per portion daily when you're heating up the daily breakfast.
- Add a pre-cut mix of green onions, parsley, (and radish if you like) to your bowl, add salt and pepper if needed. Enjoy!

This seems like a lot of work, but make big quantities, it's a part of your meal prep day, this should last you at least a few weeks of breakfast. Pre mix all you can to make this healthy and tasty breakfast alternative a feasible reality! I think you will enjoy it, and remember that it is meant to be processed easily, so you may find yourself nice and hungry by lunch, perfect! And remember this is a great base recipe that can be modified, or we can add other specific herbal medicines to it to make greater intentional shifts. Congee is the essence of food as medicine!

Food categories, energetics, and medicinal use

- Grains – Each grain has its own qualities, but you may use others in addition to the rice, or in place of the rice (let's talk!). Consider barley, wheat, buckwheat, cornmeal, millet, oats, or quinoa for more protein rich grain. White rice is ideal in extremely weak digestion or recovering from an acute illness.
- Legumes – The same concept as with the grains, lentils and mung beans are simple and easier to process, but larger more complex beans can be used too such as navy, black, pinto, adzuki, etc.
- Vegetables – Root vegetables like beets, carrots, and sweet potato are sweet and nourishing and make a great add for the long slow cook, though celery, leek, and winter squash are excellent too. However it's really important to also have some dark greens like kale, chard, spinach, nettle, broccoli, brussel sprouts, etc. that you add near the end, make it soft and cooked but still retaining their nutrients.
- Meat – You may add any meat you like to the slow cook, keeping in mind chicken and fish are lighter and easier to process but less blood building, whereas pork and lamb is in the middle, and beef, bison, and elk is nutrient dense yet is harder to process. Ground meat works really well as it dissolves evenly throughout the congee without needing to cut it up. You can use frozen meat of course, just thaw it first. A great addition is egg, it's best to cook an egg or two into the daily portion you reheat.
- Fruit – Though not your first thought most likely, some dried fruits make excellent additions to congee. Jujube dates are a Chinese congee staple, they are mild, sweet, and deeply nourishing (can be purchased at the clinic). Dried apple or pear can add some sweetness, but the dried berries are deeply medicinal, protective, and restorative, and top of the list are goji berries. Dark colored berries are preferable such as raisins, blueberries, currants.
- Nuts and Seeds – Add any of your favorite to your daily portion, cook them a bit to soften them up. If you can't process seeds very well try blending them up first. These foods are the densest form of nutrition in the plant world, think of them as the equivalent of meat. Great to regularly have in small portions, but don't overdo it. Almonds, walnuts, sunflower, pumpkin seeds, black sesame seeds, flax, and chia are some options. Shredded coconut is great as well.
- Other – Consider adding some dried mushrooms, miso, seaweed, soy sauce, mirin, nutritional yeast, coconut cream, brown sugar, sesame oil, or other delicious flavors.
- On Top – Then it's great to have a small amount of things that go on top raw such as green onions, parsley, cilantro, sliced radish, and even your nuts and seeds if your digestion can handle them raw.
- Spices and Medicinal Herbs – It depends on what flavors your body is needing, what season it is. Consider how this can become medicine to nourish you at this moment. Perhaps you need some ginger, cinnamon, and nutmeg during cold winter months. Or are you congested and tired after a sickness and would benefit from a blast of garlic, black pepper, a bunch of thyme, and some cayenne? Maybe you want a light general congee with rosemary, sage, thyme, and garlic. Or what about turmeric, fennel, and cardamom for some gentle warming balance that has a different taste? Aromatic warming spices like ginger, cinnamon, fennel, rosemary, cumin, and cardamom will strengthen the digestive fire, and we almost always want to balance the dense heavy foods with some of these to be able to transform the food into qi and blood, especially first thing in the morning. But be careful to not overdo it as too much added fire will be ultimately draining, which is the exact opposite intention of congee. The options are endless, play around! And if we're trying to deeply correct a disease process then stronger medicinal herbs will likely be recommended.