



The Chinese Diet: The Path to Harmony and Good Health

by Martin Inn L.Ac., O.M.D.

Just about everyone has an idea of what kinds of food constitute a healthy diet. Nutritional theories of what defines a healthy meal are as varied and different as there are cultures and people in the world. Each year more diet books and theories appear on the market only to change our minds and befuddle our bellies as we continually seek out the perfect diet. Some diets target specific diseases to cure, such as heart disease or cancer, and some diets appeal to our egos by telling us how to lose that extra inch or pound so that we may become more beautiful. From Macrobiotics to “The Zone” diets have become this country’s elixir to good health, youth and beauty. How can “we have our cake and eat it too?” In this generation we want it all: we want to enjoy our food, we want our food to make us more vital, healthier and younger looking. Why can’t we have it all and still have fun? Is this generation of fad diets full of promises that never deliver or are there diets that can truly give us good health, longevity, and vitality? How do we separate the true from the hype? What is real and what is just another fad?

From the past to the present, the criteria used to judge whether a diet or food plan is good or bad is based on the nutritional content of the foods and their biochemical make-up. However, with the development of modern agriculture and food processing our food has become less nutritional and our health worse. Chemical fertilizers and pesticides have allowed inferior crops to come to market, food processing has taken away the nutrients and vitality from our food, and overly busy lifestyles leave many opting for fast food. The United States, with all of its wonderful technology has created a society of overfed, malnourished, and overweight people. In a recent study by Ruben Rumbaut, a sociologist whose work was cited in the study by the National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine, it was discovered that despite generally higher poverty rates, immigrant children from the developing countries had better health than children in the United States, but the longer they remained in the US their health deteriorated to the level of US children. As they assimilate, immigrant children’s diets and eating habits deteriorate, thus causing a decline in health. Their native food and habits left behind were far better than those of the average US child.

Yin /Yang and the Five Elements

Every aspect of Chinese culture is based on the principles of the ancient philosophy of Yin and Yang and the Five Elements. This philosophy was written in the first

classic of Chinese philosophy called the I Ching or the Book of Changes, which is over three thousand years old. Taoism, Confucianism, Chinese medicine, Chinese landscape painting, geomancy, Feng Shui, the internal and external martial arts, dance, music, and cooking all have their foundation in these principles of contrast, balance, harmony, and change. In Chinese medicine the five tsang or solid organs are correlated to the five elements and the five tastes. Bitter is correlated to the heart and is the element of fire, sweet to the spleen and is the element of earth, sour to the liver and is the element of wood, spicy to the lungs and is the element of metal, and salty to the kidneys and is the element of water. A healthy meal should incorporate all of these tastes, which stimulates each one of these corresponding organs. It is believed that over stimulation of anyone of these organs or a lack of stimulation may lead to an imbalance in the relationship of these internal organs. This imbalance can eventually lead to a disease. A typical imbalance that a Chinese doctor often sees is wood overcoming earth. This means the Qi of the liver is stronger than the Qi of the spleen and upsetting the healthy balance between the two organs. This manifests with the symptoms of having poor digestion, an easily upset stomach, poor appetite, gas, a burning sensation in the stomach, nervousness, easy anger, stomach acidity, stomach pains, nausea, ulcers, and perhaps a hiatal hernia. A dietary solution to this problem would be to eat less sour foods such as pickles, citrus, wine, vinegar and tomatoes because sour foods over-stimulate the liver thus causing a greater imbalance between liver and stomach/spleen, wood and earth. On the other hand this doesn't mean that one should eat more sweets.

Cold and Raw Foods Toxins and Fasting

Another dietary prohibition is the eating of cold and raw foods. The image of the digestive system in Chinese medicine is that the stomach is like a large cauldron and the lower abdomen is the fire which cooks the food in the cauldron. The digestion of food is the cooking of food in the stomach, which breaks down the food to make it more easily, digestible. If the food is raw the stomach must cook it. If the food is already cooked then the food is more easily digested and assimilated into the body. If the food is cold, the body must first heat up the food in order to cook it. This creates more work for the digestive system and ultimately taxes the stomach qi so that it becomes deficient. The habitual eating of cold and raw food puts out the lower abdominal fire and the food in the stomach is left undigested and unprocessed. It passes on to the next organ which can not absorb any of the nutrients present in the food because it was not broken down into a form that can be utilized. Without any nutrition good blood and qi can not be made for the body and all the other organs and systems of the body are thrown out of balance. The body is basically starved even though good food was eaten. As a doctor of Chinese medicine I have observed that my patients with digestive disorders often have very cold abdomens while the rest of the body is relatively warmer.

When I was much younger, before I became a Chinese doctor, I experimented with many different diets and foods. I was a vegetarian for 15 years, I ate macrobiotically for several years, and I tried an all-raw diet for several months. I also fasted on

water, was on a mono diet of brown rice or at other times just juice. I was curious to know more about my body and how it changed and reacted to different foods, different amounts of foods, and different diets. I also wanted to know about the body's ability or need to cleanse itself of toxins or how much energy it could develop with these different diets. My experiences led me to conclude that the most healthy diet and way of eating/cooking lay in the balance of food that gave the body the best opportunity to digest and absorb all the nutrients I ate. When I ate concentrated or very rich foods I could not digest them. When I fasted it threw my body out of balance and damaged my digestion. When I ate an all-vegetarian or raw diet my spleen became deficient to the point that I became seriously ill. My immune system was so weakened that I was getting a cold every two weeks. At this time my allergies were the worse they had ever been. Eating a more balanced diet over a period of time brought my body back into harmony and my health returned with a stronger immune system. Many people are obsessed with the idea of cleansing the body as a means of obtaining good health. The idea behind this outlook is that poisons from the food or the body are obstructing the path to good health, thus the best way to cleanse the body is to drink tremendous amounts of water, fast, or take colonics. This may work temporarily but if the body needs to purge any unwanted substances or toxins, it can easily do so if it is in balance since toxins will not build up in the body if the body is in harmony. The body has a wisdom which can easily be corrupted by the mind. If we can learn to listen to the body and not to the mind, in these instances we will make the right choices in eating. If we are out of balance then we will crave our poisons and our addictions. Any one food can become a poison if we eat too much of it. It will over stimulate those internal organs that it is correlated to and destroy the synergistic balance of the other organs.

Classification of Foods

Before we can discuss what a balanced diet may be we have to know how foods are classified. Like all herbs in Chinese Medicine foods have certain properties and actions upon the body. Foods can be classified by their taste: sweet, sour, bitter, spicy, salty; the organs or meridians they affect: spleen, lungs, kidney, liver, heart; their energetic properties: cold, cool, neutral, warm, hot; specific actions: diuretic, tonifying qi, tonifying blood, astringing, cooling, stops bleeding. In general, the foods that we eat are not as strong as Chinese herbs. A good diet acts as a general mechanism to maintain balance in the body whereas herbs work more specifically to heal an ailment. Therefore, overdosing on a particular food probably won't cause irreparable harm to the body. However, eating the proper food when we are out of balance or have a specific health condition can enhance and help heal the condition.

Most vegetables tend to be cool or cold in nature. Since they have no mobility and are not animals they have a cooling affect upon the body. Grains tend to be neutral or cool. Fruits tend to be cold or cool. Since they normally are in season during the spring and Summer times they often cool off the body when the temperature is warm or hot. Fruits that are from the tropics tend to be more cooling than fruits from colder regions. In general it is best to eat fruits in season indigenous to the region that you are living in.

However, with the convenience of better transportation it is now easy and cheap to get foods that are not only from other parts of the world but foods that are out of season. In other words you can get fruits from the tropics during the winter. This may seem to be a wonderful twist from nature but it may be a disaster to your health because you are fueling your body with foods from one season when it is functioning in another.

Fish tends to be cool and neutral in energy. Although they are living creatures with blood, the environment from which fish come is cold. They are not warm-blooded like mammals.

Poultry and red meat tend to be warm or hot. Meat from mammals is warm to hot because they are red blooded, they have mobility, and they have a higher consciousness than fish. The hottest meat is lamb or venison. Beef and pork are warm, and so is chicken. Animals that are wild tend to be hotter than domesticated animals. For instance, wild boar is hotter than pork, or wild venison is hotter than deer.

Eggs and milk products are warm. Fertile eggs are warmer than non-fertile eggs. Goat milk is warmer than cow's milk. Sheep milk is warmer than cow's milk but not as warm as goat's.

Changing the Property of Food and Neutralizing Toxins

Often we are faced with the dilemma of eating a particular food because it has a high nutritional value but its action or nature may be too cold or too toxic for the body. Sometimes a food may be too indigestible to eat. The best way to change a food so that it is friendlier to our body is to cook it. Cooking can be considered a form of pre-digesting the food before we eat it. It helps break the food down into a form so that the body can more easily assimilate its nutrients. It also helps in destroying certain harmful bacteria such as salmonella or worms that might breed in our intestines. Cooking also helps warm up foods that tend to be cool or cold in nature. Although it doesn't thoroughly change its nature it helps to lessen its effects. However, when you cook something cold with some spices or herbs you can help neutralize some of the harmful effects of its coldness. For example, tofu or bean curd is very cold. In some cultures, people like to eat it raw. If you cook tofu with fresh ginger, much of the cold harmful effects can be neutralized because ginger is hot. Meat and fish often have toxins from external sources such as bacteria, worms, or hormones. Internally, toxins can also be created due to the shock of slaughtering. These toxins can be neutralized with the addition of alcohol and ginger to the cooking process. When people eat sushi, the eating of pickled ginger not only cleanses the palate but also warms the coldness of the raw sushi. The wasabi horseradish is used to kill any worms present in the raw fish.

I often advise patients who have digestive problems not to eat much fruit. Fruit tends to have a high sugar content and patients like to eat it raw. If they want to eat fruit

I advise them to cook the fruit. Bake an apple or eat some warm applesauce. They often respond by saying the cooking destroys the vitamin C. This is true but I don't think they need such high doses of vitamin C and if they did eat the fruit raw, their digestion would be too poor to absorb the vitamin. Besides, vitamin C is very cold and it tends to make weak spleens worse. The only fruit that I will advise people to eat raw is papaya. Papaya is good for the digestion and helps with elimination. Bananas are very cold and eating one is like eating an ice cube. Even if you cook a banana it is still cold.

Drink

One of the first questions I ask a new patient is whether he/she drinks coffee. I always try to get a patient to stop drinking coffee because it is such a powerful stimulant. I consider it to be one of the most powerful legal drugs. It not only directly stimulates the heart muscle but it immediately stimulates the adrenals to release sugar from the liver to boost the body's energy. Coffee really has no nutritional value.

The adrenal glands, which sit on top of the kidneys, draw their energy from the kidneys. The constant stimulation of the adrenals will weaken the kidneys and cause them to become deficient. It is very evident to me when I listen to a person's pulse if he/she drinks coffee. Coffee can really change a person's pulse and when a substance can do that it should not be consumed casually. I try to get a person to drink tea instead. It still has caffeine but it is less disruptive to the body's balance. Coffee also tends to produce heat in the body. When you drink coffee you are drinking the essence of heat. It is roasted and then brewed with heat. If a patient has a heat condition it tends to make it worse. It exacerbates sore throats, causes skin rashes to become inflamed, and makes fevers higher. Tea is cool and tends to be mildly stimulating. It has just been recommended by medical doctors to drink tea because it has some anti-carcinogenic qualities. If you are a woman with a history of fibroids in you or your family, it is important to not take any caffeine into the body. You cannot drink coffee, teas, and sodas (which have a lot of caffeine) and you cannot eat any chocolate. I don't recommend that people drink herbal teas since they are also a form of medicine. If they are drunk casually with out knowledge of their actions then they might make a condition worse. For example mint tea is a common herbal beverage. It is spicy cool and has a sedating effect. If a person with a deficient spleen, who is also yang deficient drinks mint tea, it will make their condition worse.

Too often in The United States, when we go out to eat in a restaurant, the first thing a waiter does is place a glass of ice water in front of you. Eating cold or frozen foods like ice cream will cool off the digestive fire of the lower abdomen and create poor digestion.

Carbonated drinks are another kind beverage that is not healthy for the spleen and the digestion. Sodas, beers, and carbonated water are all bad for the spleen

and stomach. The fact that they are often cold, drunk in large amounts, and are carbonated are all factors that contribute to weakening the spleen. I often see soda drinking patients in my office with swollen spleens, swollen tongues, and swollen faces.

There is a lot of controversy about alcohol. I often counsel my patients to stop drinking alcohol because the risks to the health outweigh the benefits. For women in particular it is especially devastating. Alcohol raises the estrogen level in the body very quickly, and thereby increases a woman's exposure to estrogen. This increases her risk of breast cancer and reproductive organ cancer. In men it is not as critical. Although it has been shown that one to two drinks a day is good for the heart, it is on the other hand bad for the liver. So you would be trading the kinds of diseases you would have to deal with. It is interesting to note that beer is more harmful to the spleen/stomach than to the liver because it is cold, carbonated and because it is usually consumed in greater quantities because of its lower alcohol content than wine or spirits. Wine is worse for the liver because it is sour. Since the liver reacts to sourness, over stimulation of the liver will cause injury and make the liver too excessive.

When You Have a Cold

When you have a cold you must eat differently than when you are well. Eating the wrong foods will make your cold worse and prolong your discomfort. I have often found that eating a poor diet often leads to a lowered immune system and colds. One of the early signs of an impending cold is a change in the bowel movement. If you are regular and suddenly you have diarrhea or are constipated then this should give you a signal that you are vulnerable to catching a cold or are in the process of getting one. The lungs are the first line of defense in the body and is usually the first organ to encounter the external pathogens. The sister organ to the lungs is the large intestine.

Whenever there is an attack of an external pathogen upon the lungs, its paired organ will also be affected and therefore there will be a change in the bowel movements. Sometimes due to a poor diet and weakness in the digestion, a cold can enter directly into the stomach and bypass the lungs. You will then experience a lot of gastric upset and symptoms such as nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and loss of appetite.

When you have a cold it is best to not eat anything that will weaken you. You should avoid alcohol, refined sugar, milk products, coffee, chocolate, deep-fried foods, and shellfish. Alcohol, refined sugar, and milk products produce mucous in the body. Coffee, chocolate, and deep fried foods create heat in the body and are especially bad if you have a sore throat, colored mucous, a cough or a fever. Shellfish is warm and produces wind heat in the body and must be avoided in all heat conditions and infections.

Vitamins and Supplements

When Linus Pauling proclaimed that mega-doses of vitamin C was the panacea for everything from the common cold to cancer, vitamins and supplements became a

billion-dollar industry. We often take vitamins and supplements in hopes that they will ward off future diseases and ailments. We don't really know if we need them but we feel that it is a kind of health insurance. Every week some new research has shown that daily doses of this or that vitamin will reduce the risk of some disease or condition.

The body should be able to extract or produce every vitamin and mineral we need from the food we eat. The only vitamin we can not produce is vitamin C. If our digestion is good we need not take any additional vitamins or supplements. If we take vitamins and supplements, our body no longer needs to produce them because it learns to rely on an external source. Thus, its ability to make vitamins shuts down and the body becomes completely dependent on the external sources. A weakening of the digestive system occurs and the ability to produce qi and blood diminishes.

Certain vitamins have different energetic affects on the energy of the body. Vitamin C is very cold and is also acidic. Taking too much of it will damage the stomach fire and also the stomach lining. It has also been shown that mega-doses of it will erode the teeth.

Vitamin B12 creates heat in the body. Taking too much of it will produce a niacin flush in the body. It would not be advisable to take it when there is an infection in the body or a cold. Taking too many vitamins and supplements when you don't really need to could also throw your body out of balance. My advice is to not take any vitamin or supplements unless you definitely know you lack them or that you need them for a particular health condition. For example if you are anemic you should definitely take a supplement or herbs, however, you must also seek treatment to correct the cause of the condition. Moreover, you should not rely on just the supplement to cure the deficiency.

Vegetarianism and Eating Meat

In the '90s it is increasingly popular to be a vegetarian and to shun eating red meat. Most people become vegetarians or were raised as vegetarians for health reasons. As a doctor of Chinese Medicine I treat many vegetarian patients and find almost all of them suffering from blood and qi deficiencies. They also suffer from poor digestion caused by their diets. Moreover, their bodies are not able to absorb all the nutrients from the food they eat. For most, the fats and cholesterol factor in their food was not the reason for becoming vegetarian. It is ironic that these people became vegetarians for health reasons, yet they are actually damaging their health by doing so.

One of the most common complaints by vegetarian women is either amenorrhea (no periods) or anemia. For men, the most common complaint is lack of vitality or being qi deficient. For both men and women the deficiencies manifested as a pale - yellowish complexion, dull luster to the skin, puffy eyelids, a swollen face, a pale and swollen tongue with teeth marks, tiredness and sensitivity to cold. When I advise

patients to put some red meat their diet, their whole conditions change. Although I am not an advocate of being a complete carnivore, I do feel that meat does have a place in ones diet. Meat does have more life force than vegetables and one should consider and use meat as a kind of herb or medicine. One should use it to heal and maintain the body. I eat organic red meat once in a while although I prefer not to eat it at all. When I was living in Asia I had the opportunity to visit many temples and meet with many monks. When I recall those experiences I remember I never met a truly healthy monk. Since meditation utilizes the digestive energies, the combination of being a vegetarian and being a monk was a double blow to the health of the body. (See When You Have High Cholesterol)

Processed Foods and Organic Foods

There was a study done in the mid '90s in Scandinavia on the impact of organic foods on the body. The results showed that men who were on an organic diet had a significantly higher sperm count than men who ate non-organically. This study also showed that the sperm count of men had been steadily dropping through the decades from the 1950s. One can only conclude that not only is non-organic food a threat to ones health but also to the human race.

When You Have A Skin Condition

When you have a skin condition such as a rash or poison oak, it is important to follow a simple dietary regime until the condition changes. The diet is very similar to the one recommended for colds. You must avoid foods that produce heat in the body and spicy foods that will exacerbate the skin condition. This includes coffee chocolate, deep-fried foods, hot spicy foods, and seafood. You most also avoid foods that produce dampness in the body. This includes excessive amounts of cold liquids and alcohol. If the skin condition is due to a fungus such as Candida Albicans, you must avoid all sugars, sweets, fruits, juices, mushrooms, milk and milk products, and fermented foods such as soy sauce, bread with yeast, alcohol, cheese, and left over food.

When You Have Diabetes

When you have diabetes it is of the utmost importance to maintain a balanced sugar level; there is virtually no margin to play with. Any great fluctuations in sugar levels must be regulated and brought back in balance through insulin. Therefore, it is important to not to eat sugar, foods that contain sugar, or foods that easily and quickly convert into sugar. Any great intake of sugar will immediately cause stress in the body, and will require insulin intake to metabolize the sugar. On the other hand too much insulin will also stress the body. Therefore, it is important to maintain a steady balance. White sugar, unprocessed sugar, honey, and maple syrup are all the same to a diabetic; they all require insulin to be metabolized. If you are diabetic you must be very careful with your diet and know your foods. People who became diabetic later in life do so as a result of a poor diet that is centered around a lot of

sugar. The sugar can not easily be absorbed into the cells. They are addicted to sugar as if it was a drug and it becomes very difficult to change the sugar habit even when eating sugar is life threatening. Late onset of diabetes will often lead to peripheral neuropathy (numbness of the hands and feet) and then amputation. To avoid this the diabetic must exercise, maintain a balanced diet and live a completely different lifestyle.

When You Are Pregnant

When you are pregnant it is most important to not be a vegetarian. Often vegetarians are unaware of imbalances in their diet and if they are lacking nutrition, the fetus which is being formed may be malformed or born sickly and weak. In developing countries where there is famine, whole generations are weak because of the lack of proper nutrition during pregnancy.

When You Have High Cholesterol

If you have a high cholesterol problem it is important to monitor your fat intake and to balance your condition with a lot of exercise. Your diet should be more vegetarian and only fish and small amounts of skinless chicken are allowed. You should only use small amounts of high quality extra virgin olive oil or canola oil in your cooking. The oils should be of the first pressing and cold pressed. Make sure the oil is fresh and not more than a year old. Rancid oil is very carcinogenic. In order to compensate for using less oil when you cook, use more water or even better, steam your food. You must also stay away from milk products such as cheese, milk, butter and yogurts.

Even non-fat milk products do have some fat. Substitute milk products such as margarine are more harmful to the body than butter because the oil is hydrogenated and more difficult to break down in the body. Do not eat anything deep-fried. Pastries and sweets are your worst enemies. You must read the label of every prepared food you buy and you must stay away from junk food. In other words you must cook more for yourself and eat out less.

Conclusion

This has been a distillation of my experiences with diet and health. The ideas are often surprising and contrary to western nutritional ideas. Although the purpose of eating food is to support life, it is important to realize that nutrition is not the only factor to consider. The effect of food upon the body is vast and deep.