

Wellbeing with Chinese Medicine



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Eating Right for Your Climate

by **Attilio D'Alberto** BSc (Hons) TCM MATCM (Beijing China)

When we think about Chinese Medicine we usually imagine Acupuncture, Herbs or Tui Na (Chinese style massage), but we never stop to think about the other aspects of this ancient medicine, including Diet, Exercise and Lifestyle advice. Chinese Medicine incorporates a multitude of time-honoured techniques to optimize all aspects of living. This is often referred to as 'Dao' or 'the way'. In this column, I discuss Chinese medicine's dietary therapy principles and how we can live in harmony with our surrounding environment, by utilizing foods that are common to that region and climate.

Diet therapy is a vast subject, one which is much older than Acupuncture or Herbal Medicine and can be traced back to the beginning of civilization in ancient China. Diet therapy was actually a precursor to Herbal Medicine. Often the herbs that are used in Herbal Medicine have a culinary quality, which allows a person's daily diet to become their medicine. A good example of this is ginger. Often used in Asian cuisine, ginger is used in Chinese medicine to tonify the Spleen and Stomach and aid digestion. For anyone with poor digestion and bloating, simply add raw ginger to dishes, or a few slices to hot water and honey. The importance of one's diet is well summoned by the famous, ancient Chinese medicine practitioner Sun Simao, who once said: "First, treat the disorder by changing the diet; if that doesn't work, then use Herbal Medicine".

The key to Chinese Medicine Diet Therapy is to eat certain foods that

correspond to one's environment. The British climate is naturally very damp; therefore, people who live within such an environment have more damp-related disorders, for example joint pain, arthritis, phlegm-type asthma, ME, IBS and other digestive disorders. It is, therefore, wise not to eat excessive amounts of damp foods within a damp environment, such as dairy or raw foods, as these will cause internal dampness, while the environment will exacerbate it.

Generally, everything in small quantities is often fine, but eating foods in excess that are not traditional to that country is not always a good thing. An example of this is the millions of people who eat curry every Friday or Saturday night. Hot, spicy foods are pungent and aromatic in nature, they open and disperse, and are eaten in their native countries to vent excessive heat in the body and cool the person down. If you eat hot, spicy food every weekend in a country that is not hot, then you will increase the quantity of heat in your body, known as an excessive Yang pattern. Coupled with a naturally damp climate like in the UK, this will lead to damp-heat, the most difficult pattern to treat in Chinese medicine. Disorders in women will manifest as dry, lustless skin and nails, brittle hair, acne, poor menstrual cycle and an early menopause. In men, it will manifest as tiredness, poor bowel movement, impotence and premature ejaculation. Treatment takes time, patience and money!

What is worse than eating hot, spicy food every weekend is eating it everyday. People from Asian countries who do not adapt to a traditional UK or European diet, and eat hot, spicy food everyday, will suffer from more chronic excessive Yang disorders and a severe deficiency of Yin. In my clinic, I often see a large number of men who eat a traditional Asian diet everyday, suffering from chronic fatigue, severe premature ejaculation and impotence. Women will suffer from a poor menstrual cycle, tiredness, PMT, vitiligo, acne, dry skin, infertility, brittle hair, hair loss, etc.

The British cuisine is born out of the surrounding climate. Foods are usually served hot, with sauces and hot deserts, because the surrounding climate is often cold. Foods in Beijing are often hot and oily as this helps to keep people warm in winter when it can be bitterly cold. However, as the UK undergoes climate change, our traditional diet will need to change to reflect the new environment we live in. That does not mean we should all rush out and eat a spicy curry, but rather to look at other European countries where the climate is already hot, and reflects our future climate. In many respects this is already being done with many people eating a continental diet. Our diet should not only reflect our surrounding environment, but should also include locally grown, seasonal, organic foods that pertain to that region. Hot, spicy or oily foods can still be eaten, but in much smaller quantities.