

Chinese Medicine Food Therapy Recommendations

Digestion in Chinese Medicine

In Chinese medicine, digestion is primarily the responsibility of two organs: the Spleen and Stomach. The Stomach takes in food, prepares it for absorption, and transports it to the Spleen. The Spleen then transforms the food into the nutrients the body needs. Both the Spleen and the Stomach need to work as a team to take in, process, and absorb the food that we eat. In addition, the body relies on a well-functioning Small Intestine and Large Intestine to eliminate waste. While these organs are familiar in Western medicine, they have a slightly different function in Chinese medicine!

The Spleen and Stomach, and by extension digestion, are a part of the Earth element. The Earth element represents our center, or our axis. Feeling well-nourished can help us feel centered and grounded, and can provide a good foundation for us to be able to move through our daily life. Keep in mind, the Earth element oversees the digestion of both food *and* our life experiences. So, when we talk about having poor digestion, this can refer to both digestion of food, but also lack of processing of our life experiences! This is one way that worrying and rumination can impact our digestion.

Temperature is also important for digestion. The goal is to have a warm, but not hot, digestion; cold is something to avoid too. We can manage the temperature of our digestion based on the actual temperature of our food, but the energetics of the food will also impact it. For example, warming or hot spices increase the temperature of our digestion; cold, raw foods decrease it.

Overall Guidelines

- **The overall diet pattern is more important than micromanaging each meal.** Putting a lot of focus on each meal can lead to stress, which ultimately can lead to poor digestion! So, focus instead on the average or overall picture of your food from week to week.
- **What you need may change from day to day, and will change based on the season.** Once you learn the principles of food therapy, you are able to adjust what you eat and drink based on the cues your body sends you, as well as how the environment is impacting you. You probably already do this instinctively! Eating soup when it's cold and drinking cooler drinks when it's hot are simple examples; learning food therapy principles allows you to consciously choose your food in a way that is best for you, in that moment.
- **The Spleen loves routine!** Develop a regular eating schedule that works well for you. Try to eat three meals at approximately the same time every day. Eat similar portion sizes and avoid overly restrictive or overly large portions. Avoid eating within a few hours of bedtime.
- **The act of consciously choosing foods is nourishing in itself.** While the composition of the food we eat matters, also being *aware* of what we are eating is nourishment in itself. Choosing foods that help make you feel good - mentally and physically - is a way of being kind to yourself, regardless of the macro and micronutrients in the food. This can sometimes look like avoiding foods that you know make you feel unwell, even if they may be what you're craving. But, this can also look like choosing to eat foods that may be outside your chosen food plan when you're spending time with friends and family!
- **Food provides more than just nutrients.** Being dogmatic about food to the point that you aren't able to enjoy it or the time you're spending with others can have a negative impact on health too! It is important to find balance in health-promoting behavior while also enjoying life.
- **Consider your environment when eating!** Remember: we're also digesting what is going on around us! Whenever possible, try to eat in a calm environment. Focus on eating and enjoying your food.
- **Small changes can have a big impact!** Focus on adding to, rather than subtracting from, what you eat.

Meal Composition

The basic guidelines in Chinese medicine food therapy follow what is recommended by major dietary organizations: include whole grains, vegetables, protein, and a bit of fat with each meal. Within these guidelines, we customize the food we're eating based on our Chinese medicine pattern and the season and environment around us!

- **Whole grains** can include rice (brown and white), millet, buckwheat, quinoa, teff, fonio, oats, etc. If you can eat gluten, farro and barley are great options too!
- **Vegetables** include starchy and non-starchy vegetables.
 - *Starchy* vegetables are things like potatoes (white, sweet, yams, etc.) and some winter squashes (acorn, butternut, pumpkin, etc.).
 - *Non-starchy* vegetables are everything else: broccoli, cauliflower, green beans, peas, leafy greens, summer squash (and spaghetti squash!), etc.
- **Protein** can be meat or non-meat. Non-meat proteins like beans and lentils are great for your health (lots of fiber!) and can be easy to include in a meal. Tofu and tempeh also make great non-meat protein options. Animal protein can also have a healthful place in your diet, and Chinese medicine has recommendations for which types based on constitutional patterns. Dairy products like yogurt and eggs can also serve as protein for your meal.
- **Fats** can be good for you too! Nuts are great for you and can add texture and flavor to food. Avocados and fatty fish also fall under the "fats" category, in addition to protein.
- **Fruits** are also a great addition to your meals! Berries are especially good for you, but eat what you enjoy.

Ideally, if you look at your plate proportionally, about half the plate will be vegetables, a quarter whole grains, and a quarter protein - but this can vary based on the meal, your activity levels, your appetite, and many other factors.

Additionally, Chinese medicine recommends limiting the amount you drink in general while eating (and avoiding iced drinks in particular!). Drinking a lot of fluid can water down the digestive fire and make it harder for the Stomach to process the food for the Spleen.

Tips: You don't need to reinvent the wheel with each meal! Here are a few tips to get started:

- Using food that is pre-cut, frozen, canned, or otherwise prepared is a great shortcut to make incorporating these foods easier. If you need to watch your sodium, just make sure to rinse the canned food before using it. As much as possible, pick food that is prepped (cut, washed, etc.) but not overly processed (heavy sauces, etc.).
- Cooking in larger batches and reheating your meals can make it a bit easier for you on a day-to-day basis.
- Learning a new way to eat can take time, and you don't need to overhaul everything in a single week. Consider picking one meal to start with, or one aspect of the meal!
- Learn how to combine flavors to make meals you *enjoy*! Try picking out a few pre-made spice blends, or learn flavor profiles for your favorite cuisines and try them out on your meals.

Food Preparation

Chinese medicine food therapy also puts a big emphasis on how food is prepared! Universally, **warm, cooked food is preferred**. Avoid raw food and iced drinks (this includes smoothies!) whenever you can.

- If you have poor digestion (which can show up in ways like constipation, diarrhea, fatigue, acid reflux, etc.), the #1 recommendation is to avoid raw, uncooked, and cold food, along with oily/greasy foods (like deep-fried food).
- The food preparation methods change through the seasons! Cooler and less cooked food is more acceptable in the summer, for example, while it is best to eat warm, thoroughly cooked food in cold temperatures.