



The Spleen Friendly Diet

Chinese Nutrition, along with acupuncture, herbs, Qi¹ Gong/Tai Chi¹ and Tuina massage, is one of the 5 branches of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) which all share the same underlying theories, but the starting place is always nutrition. In many cases diet is the CAUSE of imbalance, and treatment cannot be successful without dietary change. Almost every treatment in TCM can be improved by also addressing diet.

Sin Simiao (孙思邈), a famous Chinese medicine Doctor, titled “China’s King of Medicine” (药王) for his significant contributions to Chinese medicine and tremendous care to his patients, once said “*When a person is sick the doctor should first regulate the person’s diet and lifestyle*” (Circa. 580 CE).

Although this has been re-iterated by many in the West over the centuries, this information has been largely ignored until relatively recent times. Hippocrates, (c. 460 – c. 370 BCE) ‘The Father of Western Medicine’ once wrote “*Let food be thy medicine and medicine be thy food*”, and later, Thomas A. Edison (1847 - 1931) once said “*The doctor of the future will give no medicine, but will interest his patients in diet and nutrition, exercise and the care of the human frame. He will teach them about the cause of all disease.*”

Whereas western nutrition looks at the composition of foods e.g. vitamins, protein, carbohydrates, fibre etc.) and treats mainly diseases – a “One size fits all’ system of recommendations, Chinese nutrition considers the energetics of foods. i.e. What they do to you when you eat them, (heating, moistening, strengthening etc.) and treats patterns of disharmony. This then gives specific advice to each individual, based on their specific circumstances and/or condition.

The Spleen = Digestion

The Spleen in TCM is not the spleen as we know it in the West. When we talk about the Spleen in TCM, we really mean ‘The Digestive System’ – so the Spleen is responsible for ALL aspects of digestion. Conditions such as constipation, diarrhea, bloating after eating, food intolerance and indigestion will all involve the Spleen in some way. The digestive organs are located in the centre of the body, and are at the centre of our energetic system. In all aspects of health and disease it is always vital to ‘protect the centre’ which means to avoid any kind of damage to the Spleen and Stomach. If the Spleen is nourished, supported and cared for with good nutrition, it can be the building block for good health.

The Spleen Friendly Diet – The most important part of Chinese Nutrition!

The Spleen friendly Diet is the basic ‘healthy diet’ of TCM, suitable for most people, most of the time. It is a way of eating that is gentle on the spleen – to provide maximum nutrition (*Gu Qi*) from our food, and reduce **Damp**² and **Phlegm**³. It promotes long life and abundant health and it’s two main components are **WHAT** we eat and **HOW** we eat.

The ‘Cooking Pot’ Analogy – Transformation (*Hua*) is a warm process and needs Spleen Yang (heat). The digestive system is like a cooking pot suspended over a fire. Our food is cooked down (digested) in this pot to the form of a warm mash. This is the state the body needs it to be in to extract the goodness.



Main Spleen Friendly Diet Do's and Don'ts:-

- **Cooked & Warm Foods** – The closer to a warm soup our food is, the less work we have to do to ‘rot and ripen’ it. Too much cold food or water douses the digestive fire. Body temperature or above, lightly cooked food is best. Cooking vegetables does diminish its vitamin content but the net gain may be higher for cooked vegetables than raw, due to the ease of digestion. However, as raw food is more cleansing, maybe it does have some place in the modern world.
- **Reduce Damp Foods** – The western diet is FULL of **Damp**² and **Phlegm**³ producing foods, and these should be reduced, especially for those with a weak digestive system. **Reduce:** Dairy products, sugars, wheat, oils and fats, concentrated fruit juices, nuts, fatty meat, bananas. Two ‘Spleen Destroyers’ in the western diet are: PIZZA (contains wheat, dairy and oils). ICE CREAM (cream, cold and sugar).
- **Moderation & Variety** – Rotate foods. Every food has a different Qi. There should be NOTHING that we consume EVERY day.
- **Chew Well** – It is the first stage of digestion - *“The Stomach has no teeth”*.
- **Relax** – Let your Qi work on digestion. Especially avoid strong emotions and mental work (Yi).
- **Don't overeat** – Stop when you are 80% full.
- **Don't flood the Spleen** – A little warm liquid with meals is ok, but not too much, and not cold drinks.
- **Take light exercise after a meal** – Don't rush back to work! Digestive *Qi Gong*⁴ after a meal is a very good way to help the food digest.
- **Always eat breakfast** – Eat breakfast like a King, lunch like a prince and evening meal like a pauper! In TCM, the Earth⁵ element is strongest between 7-11am...
- **Don't eat late at night** - ...and the Earth⁴ element is weakest between 7-11pm.
- **Eat Seasonal and Local** food to tune into the Qi¹ of the natural world.
- **Avoid processed and artificial foods** – Processing destroys nutrients in the food. Most contain sugar – *“The Great White Death”*. In western terms, sugar over stimulates the pancreas, exhausts the adrenals, creates acid condition which leaches minerals leading to a loss of calcium, inhibits the immune system, increases cholesterol and damages the teeth. In TCM terms, sugar weakens the spleen and kidneys, weakens blood and produces damp and heat. So there is NOTHING good about sugar!
- **Enjoy both preparing and eating your food!** – Worrying knots the Qi¹. Worrying about food hampers digestion even more. *“Undue rigidity concerning food is itself a disease producing behavior”* – Steven Chang.
- **Organic** – In ancient Chinese times, all food was naturally organic. The long term effects of artificial chemicals used in our food is therefore unknown in TCM terms. Animal products are particularly concentrated in chemicals.
- **GM** – Genetically Modified food production involves changing the DNA of a plant or animal (Jing⁶). This could have many unforeseen consequences. GM soya is found in over 60% of processed foods! It encourages unsustainable farming practices, and once released into the environment, cannot be recalled.
- **Preserving foods** – Long storage, for instance of tinned or bottled fruits or vegetables, reduces the life force (Qi¹). Fresh is ALWAYS best, where possible. Food that is stale or has gone off is called ‘wrecked food’ and has little or no nutrient value.

FOOTNOTES:

¹ **Qi** or **Chi** (氣) pronounced “Chee” and frequently translated as ‘Energy’ in the West – according to traditional Chinese though, everything is composed of and exists because of Qi. In its widest sense, Qi accounts for all life, all inanimate objects, and all of the relationships within and between everything in the universe. By understanding the forms and actions of Qi we can understand ourselves, and the world around us.

² **Damp** – in TCM underlies many diseases and health conditions, especially chronic and complex ones. Dampness is essentially pathological fluid, which causes swelling, weight gain, and difficulty shifting weight. All kinds of secretions imply dampness – for instance, weeping skin conditions and mucous, Dampness can also lodge in the joints, causing heaviness, stiffness and swelling.

³ **Phlegm** – in TCM can be considered as a progression of Dampness to a worsening condition. It takes two forms – Substantial Phlegm such as mucous in the nasal passages, lungs etc., and Insubstantial Phlegm which can manifest as soft lumps internally or under the skin (e.g. some cysts or fibroids) and in many chronic muscle, bone or joint condition such as arthritis.

⁴ **Qi Gong** – *Qi Gong (Chi Kung)* is an ancient Chinese health care system that integrates physical postures, breathing techniques and focused intention. *Qi Gong* is made up of two Chinese words. *Qi* (see 1 above) and *Gong*, pronounced gung, which means accomplishment or skill that is cultivated through steady practice. Together, *Qi Gong* means cultivating energy, it is a system practiced for health maintenance, healing and increasing vitality.

⁵ **Earth Element** – The Earth element is one of five elements (the others are fire, metal, water and wood) which are a series of descriptors to explain various phenomena and relationships in nature and humans, including the internal organs. The elements create each other and hold each other in check. When these qualities are balanced in the body, there is health. The Earth element governs the stomach and spleen which on the Chinese clock is at its strongest between 7am and 11am, and at its weakest between 7pm and 11pm. Therefore eating a large breakfast between 7am and 11am and a small supper before 7pm in the evening is a very spleen friendly way to eat.

⁶ **Jing** – One of the ‘3 treasures’ in TCM along with *Qi* and *Shen*. Translated as ‘Essence’, *Jing* is the deepest energy of the body, and forms the foundation for life. It is stored in the Kidneys. There are two types: ‘*Pre Heavenly Jing*’ formed at the moment of conception and determines the constitution, strength and vitality of the child. It is of fixed volume and cannot be added to. ‘*Post Heavenly Jing*’ is formed and refined from eating, drinking and breathing. It is continuously being replenished.

- By maintaining a healthy lifestyle, eating well and living a regulated life we run on ‘*Post Heavenly Jing*’ and stay well.

- If we live an unhealthy life and eat poorly we draw on ‘*Pre Heavenly Essence*’ and become weak.

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