

## The Power of Food – Basics

By David Caruso-Radin, L.Ac.

### Integrated Nutrition – Where East meets West - The Best of Both Worlds :

Integrated Nutrition combines the ancient wisdom of Chinese medicine and combines that ancient knowledge with the insights from western medicine. The summation of these two schools of thought is more powerful than the two separately. Nutrition according to Chinese medicine is a system that can help keep bodily functions in equilibrium. Unfortunately, the wisdom from this philosophy was born during an age before the industrial revolution and industrial agriculture; during a time when the soil that food was grown on had adequate mineralization, when there was no such thing as “Non-organic” pesticides, white rice, bleached flour, hydrogenated oils, or Genetically Modified Organisms. In today’s world these things must be taken into account when considering your nutrition in its totality.

Nutrition According to Chinese Medicine: In Chinese Dietary therapy the energetic qualities of food are considered. Chinese medicine considers how foods affect the body – do they make us hot or cold, damp or dry, etc. Dietary therapy is a cornerstone of Chinese medicine, one of the five branches, the others being Acupuncture, Herbal medicine, Therapeutic Massage (Shiatsu, TuiNa, Reiki, etc.), and Healing Movement (T’ai Ji, Qi Gong, etc.). One of China’s ancient revered practitioners said the following,

“A superior doctor first adjusts a patient’s diet and lifestyle.  
If that fails, only then should one do acupuncture and herbs.”

- Sun Si-miao

Nutrition According to Western Medicine: In western medicine food is looked at in a more statistical manner. Western nutrition looks at: amount of calories, protein, carbohydrate, fat and vitamin and mineral content. Hippocrates, who is commonly considered the “father” of western medicine thought food had the power to heal. He said

“Let medicine be your food and food be your medicine.”

- Hippocrates (The “father” of Western Medicine), 400 B.C.

There is no one right diet for everyone: Not everyone can benefit from a macrobiotic diet, not everyone should be vegan or even vegetarian. Some people should eat meat and/or dairy. It depends on each individual’s constitution.

**The Digestive System from a Western viewpoint:** The digestive systems function is to break down food and drink and absorb nutrients. Digestion starts in the mouth. In the mouth the act of chewing performs two important functions: the teeth break food down into smaller pieces so that the stomach can interact with more of the food; an enzyme called amylase is released with the saliva and breaks down carbohydrates. Food and drink are then propelled through the esophagus (by peristalsis) to the stomach where food is again broken down into smaller pieces so that enzymes in the duodenum can interact with more of the food; and stomach acids break down proteins, by an enzyme called Pepsin. From the stomach food and drink pass to the duodenum where enzymes from the Pancreas continue to break down food and drink. Food and drink are propelled through the Small Intestine where nutrients are segmented (further mechanical breakdown and mixing with digestive enzymes to breakdown all “classes” of foods) and absorbed. In the Large Intestine some remaining food is broken down by enteric bacteria (which also produce Vitamins K and B); most of the remaining water, vitamins and minerals are absorbed; and waste is excreted. The Liver and Gall Bladder aid the digestive processes by producing and storing the bile used to digest fats in the Small Intestine.

**The Digestive system according to Chinese medicine:** In Chinese medicine the digestive system is described energetically. The Spleen and Stomach are the organ systems most responsible for digestion, and are central in the production of Qi. Understand that when we talk about organs in Chinese medicine we are not talking about the organs themselves, but about “organ systems”, a set of functions in the “body-mind”, expressed at a physiological, anatomical, mental, emotional, and spiritual level. The organs themselves are contained in the organ systems. Please note that when we refer to the Spleen, we are referring to a system that also includes the Pancreas (a very important organ in digestion). The functions of the Spleen can be summarized as adaptation, nourishment, and support. Primarily, the Spleen performs these functions by transforming and transporting the nutrients that come from food.

**Rules:**

It is no secret that food can heal. We have all heard the saying “an apple a day keeps the doctor away.” Chinese medicine has a refined approach to this perception. There are a few basic approaches that virtually everyone can benefit from. Below are what I call The basic “rules” of this theory. Please be aware

that these are **guidelines or suggestions** to work into daily life to help bring added wellness and longevity. They are **NOT** edicts.

**Chew:** Chew 30-50 times depending on what you are eating. There is an “ancient saying” in Chinese medicine that can be paraphrased as “Drink your food, and Eat your drink.” The first stage of digestion (especially of carbohydrates) occurs in the mouth. It is important to keep food and drink in your mouth for a little while so that digestion can begin. There is an enzyme released in saliva called amylase. Amylase is responsible for breaking down the starches in carbohydrates to sugars. The less you chew the less carbohydrates can get digested. Chewing is important for fats and proteins as well. The more surface area there is around the food the more enzymes can break it down. Chewing helps to get food in small enough pieces for the stomach to break the food down further to the point where enzymes released by the pancreas can fully digest the food.

**Eat slowly and consciously:** As was mentioned before it is very important to chew your food. It is also important to eat slowly. It takes time for the Pancreas to release the many enzymes needed to digest a meal, and the more time you give the stomach to break down food the more nutrients you can absorb. There is a saying, “When you try to do two things at once you can’t do either of them very well”. If we are paying attention to the television or a book, then much of our Qi is going to “fuel” the brain, rather than to efficiently digest nutrients. That is why it is important to eat consciously.

**Eat moderately:** Try to finish your meal before you are completely full. In Chinese Medicine they say eat until you are 2/3s full (satiated). If you over-eat you create a situation of stagnation. The food gets “backed-up” in a “holding pattern.” This over-taxes the digestive system, and creates a situation where some of the nutrients can not get processed. There is a limitation of how much the digestive system can process at one time. Some Ancient Chinese physicians believed that the most important factor in longevity was, not consuming too much food.

**Don’t drink with a meal:** It is best not to drink with a meal, to have at least 15-20 minutes before and after a meal where you don’t drink. The reason is that liquids dilute and “wash away” the digestive acids and enzymes you need in order to properly digest food. A glass of wine or hot digestive tea may be okay. Wine and certain teas can actually aid in digestion, for example, if you eat raw foods tea can help to warm up the Spleen and Stomach and aid in digestion.

**Eat Organic food:** (especially the Top 20): A study published in the *Journal of Applied Nutrition* (Vol. 45, 1993) compared organic produce with similar varieties of conventional produce. Results revealed organic products had, on the average, over 90% more vitamins and minerals as compared to conventionally grown produce. Organic food is grown in mineral rich soil (due to the use of cover crops and crop rotation), and most organic food is fresher (nutrients deteriorate over time (greens lose up to 50% of many nutrients after 5 days. Long term effect of exposure to pesticides is still being studied (discuss variables that make this research hard if not impossible) but there is some suggestion that pesticide exposure may have some effect on the rise of some cancers, infertility, and other disorders. A Danish study showed that men whose diets were composed of at least 25% organic produce had sperm counts 43% higher than men who ate conventionally grown produce.

**Eat locally:** Eating locally means eating foods from your general area. There are a number of benefits to “Eating locally”. From a health stand point, the food is fresher (greens lose up to 50% of many nutrients after 5 days) and therefore contain more nutrients.

**Eat seasonally:** According to Chinese medicine your body benefits from different foods during different seasons. Those are most often the foods that grow in those seasons. In the summer your body is looking for lighter cooling foods, and in the winter heartier warming foods. In the summer that might be Peaches, and the winter Pumpkin.

**Eat Whole Foods:** (Don't eat refined foods): Whole foods offer you more complete more usable nutrients. The classic example is white rice. There are many nutrients including protein found in rice bran. When the bran and germ are scoured off you lose many vital nutrients. Sometimes you'll see on a processed food package that it is enriched. Very often when a whole food is processed, a manufacturer will attempt to put many of the vitamins and minerals lost back in. The problem with enriching a processed food is that the vitamins and minerals added back in are not in a form that is as readily available as the form found in the whole food. Some forms of food processing actually alter the chemistry of the food. As an example, homogenization of milk allows xanthine oxidase, an enzyme normally found in cream, but excreted without entering the bloodstream, to now enter the bloodstream. Many researchers believe that this may have a lot to do with why we are seeing increased arterial scarring and fatty deposits in the arteries of children as young

as three years of age. It is nearly impossible to avoid all processed foods in this day and age. Two good rules of thumb when buying processed food are: Choose products with as few ingredients as possible; and don't choose a product with ingredients that are difficult to pronounce☺.

**Avoid hydrogenated fats:** Hydrogenation of fats alters their chemical structure. This has a good effect and a number of bad effects. On the positive side, the oils won't spoil; some say hydrogenated oils have an unlimited shelf life. On the negative side:

- 1) these oils have no nutritive value - their essential fatty acids have been destroyed;
- 2) they often contain trace amounts of nickel and aluminum which are by-products of the refining process;
- 3) they contain trans-fatty acids, which effect cholesterol levels raising LDLs and lowering HDLs,
- 4) they inhibit the Liver's detoxification function,
- 5) they change the permeability of cell membranes -which among other things may increase allergic reactions and decrease immune function
- 6) and lastly they may reduce the Heart's ability to function because trans-fatty acids breakdown more slowly, and the Heart uses the by-products of synthesized essential fatty acids as its favorite fuel. Trans-fatty acids appear to be such a large problem that the country of the Netherlands has banned the sale of all margarine containing trans-fatty acids.

"Eat things that spoil, but eat them before they do."

-Udo Erasmus

**Eat with variety, but simply:** -try to eat with as little complexity as possible during a meal. Enzymes do most of the work of digestion. The Pancreas releases most of the enzymes used to digest food, but can release only so many different enzymes at one time. If you eat a meal with two different kinds of protein, 2 different kinds of fat, and three different kinds of carbohydrates, some of that food will not get properly digested, because different enzymes are necessary for different foods. When you eat a complex meal...Try to eat proteins first so the stomach can help break them down before other foods enter, and try to eat fruits at times other than during a big meal. When fruits are eaten with other foods they frequently get passed through without proper digestion and ferment in the intestines (the perfect food for many of the "unfriendlies" in your intestines). However, while it is important to eat simply

at any one meal, it is important to eat a variety of foods over time to get a good mixture of vitamins, minerals, and other important phyto-chemicals.

**Eat more vegetables, fruits and grains:** It is best to have a diet of: 40-60% Vegetables and Fruits, 30-40% Grains, and 10-20% Protein (Beans, Dairy, Meat, and Nuts because your body requires what they have. These figures will of course very depending on your individual constitution.

**Eat before you are “starving”:** When you get too hungry your blood sugar drops and your body goes into craving mode...Looking for the quick carbohydrates of refined foods.

**Eat relaxed:** The worst time to have a family spat is at the dinner table. When we are angry our Qi rises, and sometimes stagnates. The activity of eating is one where Qi needs to fall, to aid in the downward flow of digestion. Anxiety is another emotion similar to anger where Qi rises. If you eat lunch at your desk while ruminating over all of the work that still needs to be done is also detrimental to good digestion.

**Eat with a positive attitude:** We all have preconceived notions about foods that may be “good” for us or “bad” for us, especially if we are on a set diet. There may be foods you don’t like that are “good” for you or foods that you like that are “bad” for you. What is most important is that when you eat food you don’t like (because it is “good” for you), or eat food that is “bad” for you, because you like it, that you eat this food in a positive manner. It is important that you don’t resent yourself or the food that you are eating. Your attitude is often as important as what it is that you put in your mouth.

**Eat early:** (try to eat by 6:00pm; try to eat after 8:00pm very rarely): In Chinese medicine there is a special clock that indicates the most active and least active times of the day for the various organs. The Stomach and Spleen (the two major organs of digestion) are most active from 7am-11am and least active from 7pm-11pm. Therefore it is best to eat larger meals earlier in the day and lighter meals later in the day. An additional reason is that the Gall Bladder and Liver (the organs most responsible for filtering toxins) are most active from 11pm-3am. Therefore if you need to eat late it is best to finish eating before 8pm. This gives your body three hours to get through the most intensive stages of digestion, and then allowing it to concentrate on toxin filtration at 11pm.

**Stoke your digestive fire:** The Spleen, along with the Stomach, is the organ in Chinese Medicine that is most responsible for digestion. The Spleen likes a

warm and dry environment in order to function well. Too much cooling (literally cold food and drink like ice cream, or foods with a cold energetic property (to be discussed later)) and/or raw food make it difficult for the Spleen to “stoke” the digestive fire. This creates a situation where digestion is not complete, and nutrients are not completely assimilated.

**Eat based on your constitutional type:** This is the key to Chinese nutritional therapy. Each person has different energetic qualities (Hot, Cold, Damp, Dry, and Windy). In Chinese Dietary Therapy it is important to match your constitutional type to the energetic qualities of many (definitely not ALL) of the foods you eat. There may be other factors contributing to your constitutional type based on disharmonies (Deficient Yin, Deficient Yang, Deficient Blood, Deficient Qi, Damp, Excess Heat, Excess Cold, Damp Heat, Qi Stagnation, or Blood Stagnation). You should choose some foods in your diet that can help return your body to equilibrium, tonifying or reducing certain qualities to correct any disharmony.

**Good Sources for Further Study:** *Healing with Whole Foods*, Paul Pitchford; *The Staying Healthy Shopper’s Guide*, Dr. Elson Haas; *Staying Healthy with Nutrition*, Dr. Elson Haas; *Helping Ourselves: A Guide to Traditional Chinese Food Energetics*, Daverick Leggett; *Feng Shui and the Five Element Kitchen*, Ilse Maria Farnow, et al.; *Fats that Heal, Fats that Kill*, Udo Erasmus..