



NUTRITION / DETOXIFICATION

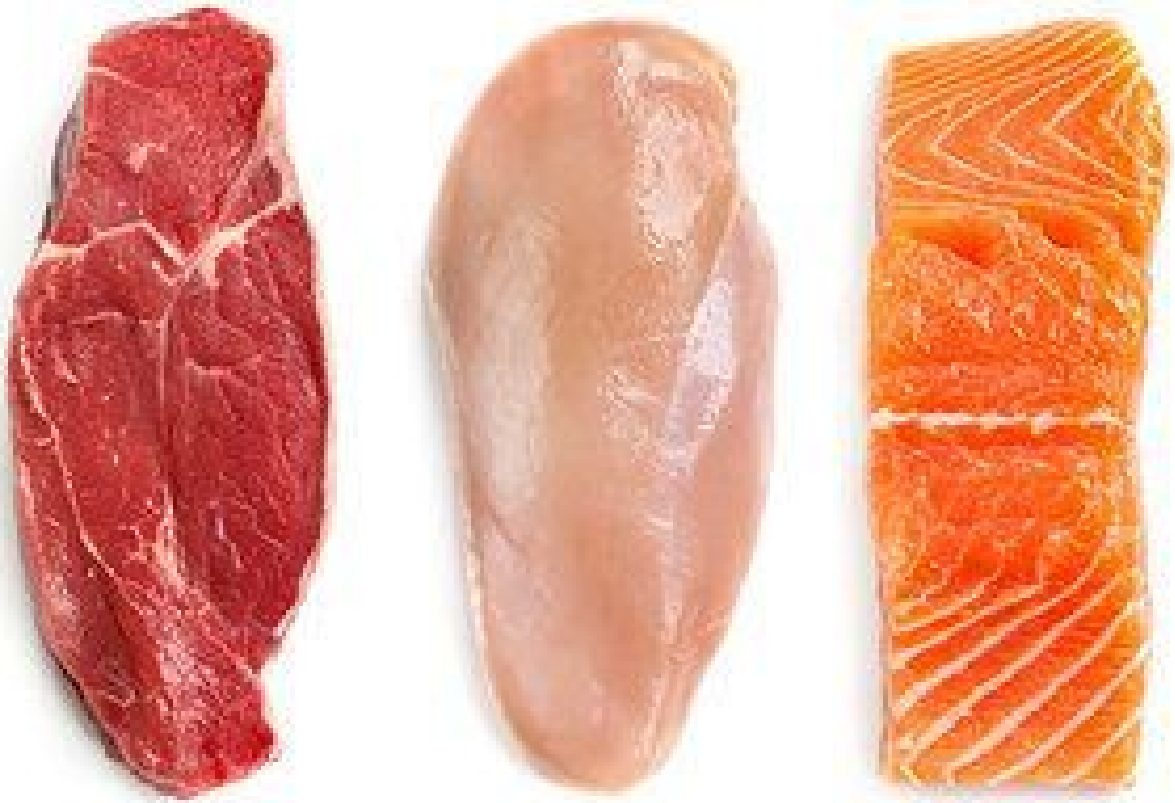
## The Raw Food Debate: Practitioners Discuss Nutrition & TCM

Brandon LaGreca, LAc

*Editor's Note:* Licensed acupuncturist and fellow blogger Elissa Gonda joins this month's column for a conversation about raw food diets. She brings her perspective on the healing potential of a raw primal diet.

Brandon: This conversation began after a blog I wrote called "The Failing of Raw Food Diets." I presented the traditional Chinese medicine perspective of cooking foods to make them easier to digest, particularly for deficient patients. You raised some interesting points that contrast what we've been taught in traditional Chinese dietetics. Why don't you begin by discussing your introduction to raw dieting and the benefits you've received from following it.

Elissa: Hi Brandon, thanks for the opportunity to share my musings on raw food. I'm the kind of raw foodie that includes meat, eggs, and dairy. I was first introduced to author Aajonus Vonderplanitz and *The Primal Diet* by my classmate, Phil, during my master's program, and I admit to being downright judgmental when Phil sat down next to me in the break room and ate raw chicken for lunch. Owing to my education, at the time I was recommending that all patients eat a cooked food TCM diet. Later, in private practice, I discovered that I had better clinical success with basic nutritional coaching. Moreover, my personal health hadn't improved using TCM nutrition, so by the time I was reintroduced to *The Primal Diet* in 2013, I was willing to put TCM's raw food embargo to the test.



Over the past five years, *The Primal Diet* has improved my asthma, allergies, digestion, sleep, strength, energy levels and eyesight. It has slowed the aging process, balanced my emotional health and enabled me to think more clearly. I no longer chronically suffer from Spleen or Lung Qi Deficiency, Phlegm or Dampness. Based on my personal success, I believe that it is harmful to advise patients to avoid raw foods. Raw foods are replete with microbes, enzymes and easily assimilated micro and macro nutrients. Less nutritious cooked foods contain compounds that are carcinogenic, genotoxic, inflammatory, and neurodegenerative.

Brandon: Where do we place that perspective within an ancestral context? One view from conventional anthropology suggests that harnessing fire was the key technology that separated *Homo sapien* from other primates species. By cooking food, we were able to expand our diet to include previously indigestible fibrous plants. Heating food also liberates calories, and by simplifying digestion, the body was able to allocate resources to higher brain development while reducing the size of the gastrointestinal (GI) tract.

Elissa: This viewpoint is controversial because evidence does not support the extensive use of fire during the required time period. Well accepted theories suggest that cooking became prevalent around 20,000 years ago; the evolution of the human brain and GI tract occurred millions of years prior when our chimpanzee-like ancestors began consuming raw meat, bone marrow and brain matter; and the major transition to cooking vegetables, beans, and grains occurred when civilizations grew in numbers, placing greater demands on fresh food supplies.

Speaking of ancestral perspectives, thousands of years ago the Chinese dish *Kuai Sheng*, thinly sliced or shredded raw meat from a wide variety of sea and land animals, influenced the raw traditions of Japan and Korea. Confucius was known to enjoy *Kuai Sheng*, and it was written of in *The Analects of Confucius*. Raw and even living foods are still eaten in China, as are fermented raw beef, pork, oysters, and fish.

Brandon: You mentioned that cooked foods contain harmful compounds; this is true in a number of cases. It began when our ancestors created heterocyclic amines in charred bits of meat roasted on an open fire and it continues, perhaps most disastrously, with the formation of trans-fats in food cooked in deep fryers filled with rancid soy or corn oil.

Yet, clearly there are foods that cannot or should not be consumed raw, in some instances because they contain anti-nutrients such as lectins, oxalates, and phytates. Cooking helps to denature these compounds and humans gained a survival advantage with access to a wider variety of food. I think mostly of plants that provide vitamins, minerals, and unique phytonutrients once cooking breaks down cell walls and helps deactivate plants' chemical defense system. Certainly this is true of most Chinese herbs where some application of heat accentuates the healing potential of some medicinals while mitigating toxins in others.

Elissa: If it's a matter of survival, by all means people should eat whatever food is available to them. Outside of these circumstances, it is circular logic to cook food—knowing that cooked food is less nutritious and has harmful properties—just to be capable of eating otherwise inedible substances. The vast majority of humans are not critically in need of more calories or access to a wider variety of foods.

Regarding oxalates and stone formation—the amount of salt in the diet is of greater concern to me than raw foods. Lectins are found in many types of foods that can be eaten raw, including dairy products and vegetables. Raw vegetables can be juiced, rather than cooked, to aid digestion. When not consumed excessively (for example, in a diet that relies heavily on beans and grains) lectins have known health benefits and are essential to normal physiological functions.

Cooking phytic acid and lectin containing foods such as grains, seeds, nuts, and beans produces advanced glycation end products and acrylamides, compounds known to be detrimental to health. Taoists and other groups in China have historically abstained from grains, a practice called Bigu, as well as occasionally abstaining from cooked foods. This was done not only for the purposes of wellbeing or asceticism, but as acts of rebellion against the social conventions of a sedentary agrarian society. The deleterious effects of cereal grains were known in China as far back as the 3rd century BCE, according to documents discovered in the Mawangdui tomb.

Likewise, Chinese herbs have the potential to harm. Herbal formulas are medicine and should only be used when absolutely necessary. Like many herbalists, I used to routinely raid my own medicine cabinet. On a raw food diet, I rarely need herbs or supplements of any kind. Though I am grateful for Chinese herbs when indicated, my personal goal is to be completely free from all forms of medicine.

Brandon: An interesting perspective, though I've become quite partial to recommending and consuming bone broth among other cooked foods.

I'm concerned about the safety of the food supply for those who do not have access to organic and pastured animal foods. I recall an investigation from Consumer Reports that found fecal bacteria in over half of the 257 samples of ground turkey (and there was no difference whether the turkey meat was organic or not). There's speculation that bovine leukemia virus may be oncogenic in humans through transmission from infected meat and dairy. Are there ways to prepare raw animal foods to minimize risk of infections?

Elissa: Though humans are not able to contract the Bovine Leukemia Virus; stressful, toxic, and unsanitary animal husbandry practices are undoubtedly paid forward to those higher up the food chain. I firmly believe that most people are capable of rearranging finances and making time to

choose better, if they have the interest and motivation to do so.

Bacteria are widespread in soil, water, air, and on surfaces; as well as in, on, and around people and animals. It is normal and natural for bacteria, including fecal bacteria, to be present in raw food. Harmless and healthful species of bacteria, for example, those that ferment food or cause spoilage, compete with symptom causing bacteria for nutrients and habitat. Some may produce lactic acid or hydrogen peroxide, which interfere with the growth of so-called pathogenic bacteria. The pH of raw food is relatively lower than that of cooked, rendering rapid bacterial growth unfavorable, especially when food is kept below 40 degrees. These and other factors explain why the small numbers of fear-provoking bacteria in raw foods are consumed and eliminated completely unnoticed. Though I have never experienced it for myself, digestive upset related to raw foods promotes health and is self-limiting.

Food poisoning takes two forms. Food infection involves living micro-organisms. Food intoxication occurs as a result of exposure to the endotoxins and exotoxins produced by bacteria. Bacterial toxins are heat stable and can't be cooked away. Regardless, food is not always heated enough to destroy bacteria and bacterial spores, and they can be easily re-introduced after cooking. Without interference from harmless bacteria, while enjoying a relatively higher pH, pathogenic bacteria rapidly multiply. Many at risk cooked foods that are staples of the American diet are consumed carelessly. This is why most severe food poisoning is related to cooked foods. It should be easy to see why antibiotics and anti-diarrheal medications often deteriorate symptoms. Back to the topic at hand, the symptoms of food poisoning certainly don't correspond with Spleen Qi deficiency. Thus, I feel confident saying that TCM doesn't prohibit raw foods due to a fear of bacterial illness, especially since there are no micro-organisms in Chinese medicine!

Brandon: What about deficient patients? We've been taught to recommend a diet of cooked foods to compensate for weakened Spleen function.

Elissa: Let's face it: even the most well-meaning acupuncturists predominantly use warm or hot cooking methods. Food is over-seasoned, over-salt-ed and over-sweetened. Meals are then reheated, toasted, and microwaved. Processed foods are ubiquitous, as are caffeine, alcohol, chocolate and other stimulants. This leads to the exhaustion of qi, yin and blood; the stagnation of qi and blood; dampness, phlegm and toxic heat. Even for deficient patients, dietary strategies that further generate heat, stagnation and accumulation are simply not indicated. In its uncorrupted state, food variously nourishes qi, blood, yin, and yang; without inherently leading to excess or turbidity. Nature provided us with a palette of hot, warm, neutral, cool, and cold; sweet, pungent, salty, sour, and bitter foods. The five flavors and five thermal natures are readily perceived and balanced when food is eaten raw.

A pepper that is hot in nature but thermally cold cannot simultaneously generate a hot and cold condition. Beef nourishes Spleen and Stomach, qi and blood: the same organs and substances aren't damaged when the beef is raw. Indeed, raw foods are traditionally served with warming accompaniments such as perilla, fresh ginger, mustard seed, hot peppers, wasabi, scallions, garlic, and vinegar. Combining foods based on nature and temperature promotes a neutral constitution; thus, raw foods enable us to realize homeostasis.

### Resources

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