



HEALTH & WELLNESS / LIFESTYLE

## Reaching for Our Roots: Healing Digestion With a Simple Traditional Therapy

Karen M. Taylor, LAc

Are you ignoring a powerful tool in your doctor's bag? Many acupuncturists realize that Spleen Qi deficiency has reached epidemic proportions in the U.S. Yet, we don't prioritize educating our patients about the importance of warm, cooked foods.

Most of us don't have time to make nutritional counseling part of everyday care even though digestive distress is increasingly common. Fad diets, conflicting nutritional information, endless processed food choices, ice cold drinks, and little time for home cooked meals all contribute to digestive distress.

Sometimes the simplest solution is the best one. I have found this to be especially true in cases of poor absorption, constipation, lack of appetite, slow transit, stomach aches, intestinal cramping and indigestion.

### Chinese Nutrition

During my 23 years of clinical experience specializing in Chinese medical nutrition, I regularly prescribe congee, a traditional Asian rice porridge, with excellent results. Many acupuncturists are already aware that congee reinforces key concepts of Asian medicine. I appreciate the way it helps my patients understand Spleen Yang through their own experience of improved digestive fire.

While studying at Southwest Acupuncture College, my own health issues led me to seek advice from a respected professor. She taught me the benefits of traditional congee, how to make it, and where to find classical references and food energetics. She challenged me to mindfully feel into my belly after eating congee one morning and to compare that feeling to my usual breakfast of cold cereal. I've been eating my warm, moist, soothing breakfast and feeling amazingly satisfied and nourished ever since.



The value of congee remains through every health fad of the past 25 years. "Bad" foods to be avoided went from meat and eggs to fats and now to grains. When questions arise about how to be truly healthy, I suggest we rely on the time-tested wisdom of the classical texts and our deeply rooted traditions, and not let ourselves be blown off course by the smallest breeze.

### Congee in Our Diet

References to congee can be found as early as the Han dynasty, 206 B.C. to 220 A.D., but people were likely cooking congee hundreds of years prior. We can draw on the wisdom of a variety of classical medicinal congee recipes and adapt them for the modern Western palate. Congee can contain a wide variety of the highest quality gluten-free, organic whole grains, fruits, healthy fats, herbs and spices. However, never underestimate the power of a traditional white rice congee for those with compromised digestion!

In *Prince Wen Hui's Cook: Chinese Dietary Therapy*, Bob Flaws and Honora Wolfe discuss the benefits of congee; "This incredibly simple food has a number of health benefits. It is easy to digest and assimilate, it tonifies both Qi and Blood, it tones and harmonizes the Middle Burner, and it promotes urination. Depending on what is cooked with the Congee, it can have almost unlimited medicinal applications. Lord Buddha considered Congee made with milk and honey to be the chief medicinal food for preserving health. In the Mahavagga of the Vinaya Pitaka, Lord Buddha is recorded as saying: It confers ten things on him: life and beauty, ease and strength; It dispels hunger, thirst, and wind; It cleanses the bladder, It digests food. This medicine is praised by the well-farer."

### The Right Consistency

Compliance is the key; taste and consistency are crucial to success. Yet ease really is the number one reason I still eat congee today. As a busy student, I immediately started making congee

overnight in a slow cooker and found it so convenient that I've never strayed. Staying the course allowed me to discover for myself the positive effects on digestion and elimination.

I've spent years tailoring my recipes to suit my foodie taste buds as well as the diagnostic patterns of my own constitution. I've also discovered how to increase patient compliance in adopting this simple nutritional recommendation. Because this habit is easy to establish, and the results are long lasting, educating patients about congee is the best solution to offer for digestive complaints. The results have been so positive they've even surprised me.

Many of my patients report resolution of long-term digestive issues or constipation within one month of eating congee four or five times per week. They find this easy to do because this congee method is so easy and delicious. With a basic understanding of Chinese herbs such as rou dou kou (nutmeg) and sheng or gan jiang (fresh or dried ginger) it is simple to prescribe personalized congee made with ingredients found in the everyday kitchen with incredible results.

Congee sits in stark contrast to modern diets composed of dry and difficult to digest processed foods, cold options, or skipping breakfast altogether. Congee is exceptionally hydrating because it cooks slowly over many hours with ample water making it extremely easy to digest and absorb. It gently cleanses and soothes as it passes through the entire digestive system.

It's not a leap to imagine how congee in your belly would feel like a hug compared to the standard toast and coffee, yet American acupuncturists have not yet made it our mission to share this transformational wisdom with everyone.

I'm here to change that. If you haven't, start with yourself and experience just how amazing you can feel from this simple solution.

I wasn't always a congee advocate. Even though I've eaten congee for 25 years and always believed it to be a cornerstone of my excellent health, it wasn't until my own mother died from complications of constipation that I realized how important this information truly is. I am certain this warm, moist breakfast would have prevented the premature end to her brilliant life.

The benefits of a warm moist breakfast are obvious right away to patients once they feel the difference in their own stomachs and intestines. Give it a few weeks and symptoms like bloating and belching can disappear. If you are an herbalist, you can help patients tailor their congee recipes to treat a specific pattern diagnosis such as yin deficiency with false fire or Liver Qi stagnation.

If this sounds a bit overwhelming, please don't despair because it is quite simple. My mission is to provide recipes and educational materials to facilitate adopting congee as a morning ritual for everyone from toddlers to doctors of Chinese medicine.

### *Resource*

- Flaws B, Wolfe H. *Prince Wen Hui's Cook: Chinese Dietary Therapy*. Boston, Massachusetts: Paradigm Publications, 1983, p.82

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