



NUTRITION / DETOXIFICATION

## Nourishing Ourselves and Our Patients in the Time of COVID-19 (Pt. 1)

Ellen Goldsmith, MSOM, LAc, Dip. CH

*"Those who take medicine and neglect their diet waste the skill of the physician."* — Chinese proverb

Chinese medicine and its 3,000-year-old tradition of embedding food as medicine in the culture can teach us a great deal, no matter what culture we are from or live in now. The basics of Chinese nutritional therapy are steeped in the foundations of Chinese medicine, on the observation of nature and our unique interaction with it. Each of us lives in specific climates; we live through seasons and their changes, and each of us has a unique physical constitution and condition. These considerations are important to consider when making food choices and recommendations.

In the time of COVID-19, food can be one of our first forms of medicine to enhance the immune system, reduce infection and minimize the effect of the virus in its initial stages. Chinese medicine's unique approach to food as medicine provides a more specific and individualized approach to health.

The importance of cyclical and seasonal changes has an impact on our health. Each of us lives in a changing climate in which we are experiencing unprecedented changes in weather (warmer winters and hotter summers), extreme fluctuations in weather and disturbed growing seasons. We have emerged from winter, which in its usual state appears barren upon the surface, yet is one of the important times of the year for regeneration and growth. The yang *qi* of nature is unperturbed, when we also need to cultivate and nourish the innermost foundation of our bodies.



According to the National Centers for Environmental Information, this past winter was one of the warmest on record. The emergence and spread of COVID-19 during an unusually warmer winter, leading to damper conditions, is important to pay attention to, as from a Chinese medicine perspective, COVID-19 is a warm disease with wind heat pathogens that transmit easily.<sup>1</sup> We also know increased environmental instability contributes to increased stress, which is further exacerbated in people who have compromised health, as well as high levels of stress and fatigue.<sup>2</sup> The elements of damp, heat and cold are important to consider when making unique and global food recommendations in the prevention of disease.

### The Role of the Stomach and Spleen

The food we eat, no matter how "healthy," is only as beneficial to us as our capacity to break down, digest, transform and assimilate it, which is attributed to stomach and spleen yang *qi*. The harmonious process of digestion is key to the quality of our vitality and *qi*, our physical treasure. And the state of our *qi* creates the physiological ground for a strong and clear spirit or shen, our most subtle treasure. Thus, we not only nourish our bodies to prevent disease, but also nourish a stable and well-balanced state of mind.

With the above as background, let's outline food strategies to improve general health (supporting the digestive capacity and the stomach / spleen network); provide general and specific guidelines from a Chinese medicine perspective on foods and cooking methods; and discuss lifestyle recommendations, all to support your health during this time of the coronavirus.

### Removing Obstacles to Cure

If our health is compromised due to poor underlying health conditions, stress, overwork or fatigue, we become more susceptible to acute illness as our protective *qi* is diminished and our immune system is taxed. So, what do we do? First things first, we need to remove those obstacles to cure

which obstruct healing and are interwoven in our lifestyle and the foods we eat:

*Manage stress.* Stress is inevitable during this time. However, we can learn to manage and lower our stress response with exercise (walking, biking, yoga, strength training, *tai chi* or *qi gong*, swimming), meditation practices, any artistic outlet, strong emotional bonds with friends and family, and being out in nature. Stress can lead to anxiety, insomnia, physical tension, reactivity and mood swings.

*Improve sleep.* Poor sleep is a tremendous burden on the immune system. If you are having trouble sleeping, reduce caffeine and stimulating and spicy foods, and try a hot bath before bed. Add calming herbal teas, e.g., chamomile, chrysanthemum, skullcap, lavender, lemon balm or licorice.

*Move your body.* Movement is crucial to moving the lymphatic system and moving fluids through the body. Gentle exercise is just fine. Do what makes you feel good: dancing, walking, yoga, *tai chi* or *qi gong*, biking or swimming. Move your body at least 30 minutes a day.

### Food Choices That Support a Healthy and Harmonized Stomach and Spleen

*Eat regular meals.* Even if your meals are small, regular eating is important to maintain strong spleen *qi*. Blood sugar regulation also reduces stress on the endocrine and digestive system.

*Avoid overeating.* Overeating taxes our digestive system, the center of good health in the body; and adds to stagnation and dampness. Overeating happens for many different reasons and can be hard to change. Here are some ways to do it:

- See if you can serve yourself from the stove. Make a plate and stop after eating that plate.
- Chew, chew, chew. Chewing well slows down everything, is calming to the nervous system and helps digestion. Try chewing your food at least 30 times and you will start to note a big difference.
- Breathe in and breathe out, over and over again. This is enormously calming to the whole body.

*Avoid foods that contribute to a warm and damp condition.* This includes spicy, greasy, fatty or creamy foods (rich sauces, ice cream), dairy, shrimp, sugar (including artificial sweeteners) and alcohol.

*Avoid foods that can be hard on digestion:* raw and cold foods (especially foods eaten directly from the refrigerator) which weaken the stomach fire and digestive capacity. Raw and cold food require enormous amount of stomach *qi* to break down.

*Pay attention to cooking methods:* Avoid fried foods, heavy grilling or the overuse of heavy animal fat in cooking.

*Eat foods that are easy to digest and are nourishing* such as lightly cooked vegetable broths, soups or congee (a rice soup made with ratios of one cup rice to 12 cups of water, cooked slowly for two hours).

*Include the rainbow of colors on your plate.* Include foods that have all the colors: orange / yellow, red, green, green and more green, beige, blue or black. This will ensure a balance of the five flavors (sweet, sour, salty, pungent and bitter).

*Eat foods of a neutral or slightly warming thermal nature* such as whole grains, beans and legumes, carrots, winter squashes, nuts and seeds, and mushrooms of all varieties.

*Include plenty of fresh vegetables.* Radishes, daikon and scallions all have a pungent and dispersing nature. Include dark, leafy greens as well.

*Eat whole fruits, which are hydrating and cleansing.* Gently cooking fruits makes them easier to digest. Pears have an affinity for the lungs, and are sweet, slightly sour and cooling. Apples are sweet and sour, hydrating, and support the stomach and spleen. However, bananas and other tropical fruits have higher sugar content and a colder nature, and thus are best to avoid. Oranges are high in sugar, but can be eaten (not drunk) in small quantities to alleviate thirst. On another note, add tangerine, lemon or orange peel zest to hot tea or foods to activate digestion and help clear phlegm.

*Herbs and spices found in your kitchen cabinet are a treasure trove of medicine.* Cook with herbs and spices to add flavor, increase palatability and direct the medicinal effect of your cooking. The following aromatic herbs and spices have a gentle warming and moving effect on digestion: basil, thyme, rosemary, sage, oregano, parsley, cardamom, cinnamon, nutmeg, cloves, turmeric, cumin, coriander, ginger (fresh or dried), black pepper (in small amounts), anise seeds, and dill. These herbs and spices, while stimulating digestion, counter the accumulation of dampness in the body.

*Editor's Note:* Part 2 of this article will address additional foods to support the immune system and overall health; and specific foods to eat whenever you start to feel sick.

### *References*

1. Yan X, et al. The dampness epidemic: exploring the clinical characteristics of COVID-19 in Shanghai. *Shanghai J Traditional Chinese Med and Pharmacol (Shanghai Zhongyiyao Zazhi)*. Fruehauf, Heiner, redaction and translation.
2. McMahon B. "Underneath the Epidemic: An Examination of the Seasonal Energetics of *Wuyun Liuqi*, Chinese Medical Treatment and Preventative Strategies for COVID-19." National University of Natural Medicine, College of Classical Chinese Medicine.

JUNE 2020