



In traditional Chinese medicine, foods of different colors are believed to benefit certain organs.  
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# Diet cures more than doctors? You are what you eat, traditional medicine says

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The “Yellow Emperor’s Inner Canon” (黄帝内经), the earliest text of traditional Chinese medicine, written more than 2,300 years ago, prescribes *shi yin you jie* (饮食有节) — or “eating and drinking in moderation” — as a prerequisite for people to live to 100.

At the very beginning of the book, the Yellow Emperor posed a question about human health and lifespan.

He asked Celestial Master Qibo, a legendary Chinese doctor and court minister, why people in more ancient times could live to be 100 and still look young, while contemporary people half that age were already showing signs of physical decline.

The legendary doctor explained that one factor was a balanced diet and moderation in eating and drinking. By contrast, he said, contemporary people were indulging in drink and debauchery, squandering their bodies and minds, and leading to physical weakness and shortened lifespans.

Unlike the West, where foods are evaluated for protein, calories, carbohydrates, vitamins and other nutritional ingredients, traditional

Chinese medicine usually defines food by properties — hot, warm, cold, cool and mild; by flavors such as sour, pungent, bitter, salty and sweet; by the colors red, green, yellow, white and black; and by food types: grains, fruits, meat and vegetables.

In terms of properties, hot, warm, cold, cool and mild don’t refer to the temperature of food, but rather how the foods affect human organs and *qi* (vital life energy).

For example, hot and warm foods, such as pepper, cinnamon, mutton, venison, glutinous rice, oats, red dates, garlic, chives, onion, coffee, black tea and chicken, are believed to warm the spleen and stomach, dispelling coldness, raising *yang* in kidneys and addressing symptoms such as cold limbs, loose stools and excessive urination at night.

Pungent foods, such as fresh ginger, leeks, Chinese chives and spearmint, tend to affect the lungs and large intestine, promoting circulation and stimulating the appetite.

Sweet foods, including honey, taro, sweet potato, pumpkin, corn, sugar cane, apples, pears, cherries, carp and abalone, can affect stomach and

spleen, slowing down acute reactions and neutralizing the toxic effects of other foods.

Salty foods, such as millet, barley, seaweed, sea clams, oysters, pork, dried mussels, ham and duck meat, are said to affect the kidneys and bladder, dissipating accumulations, nourishing the blood and lubricating intestines to induce bowel movements.

However, traditional Chinese medicine doctors warn that habitual intake of a particular flavor or taste may throw things out of balance, causing adverse reactions or damage to certain organs.

Regarding colors, red foods, such as red beans, tomatoes, apples, watermelon and red dates, are said to be good for the heart. Green foods, including cucumbers, green beans and wax gourds, benefit the liver and gall bladder. Yellow foods, such as soybeans, bananas, malt, sugar cane and yams, promote the functions of the spleen and stomach. White foods, such as fresh ginger, white turnips, pears and almonds, can help the lungs. And black foods, including black sesame, black fungus, seaweed and walnuts, benefit kidney function.

When talking about the types of

food, the “Canon” says that grains like rice, glutinous millet, wheat and soybeans provide nourishment. Fruits such as dates, almonds, peaches and chestnuts provide support. The meat of domestic animals like cattle, sheep, pigs and chickens provide enrichment. And a variety of vegetables provide supplements.

Traditional Chinese medicine doctors also frequently urge people to eat more seasonal foods and avoid off-season vegetables and fruits. According to the “Canon,” that is the way to make one’s body correspond to the *qi* of different seasons.

Due to the great importance placed on diet, people who visit a traditional Chinese medicine doctor because of pathogenic symptoms are usually given advice first on altering their diets. Only if that fails will they be prescribed some bitter-tasting herbal medicines or applications of acupuncture and moxibustion.

It seems that the traditional Chinese medicine practitioners agree with the old Scottish saying: Diet cures more than doctors.

So, in the preservation of health and well-being, “you are what you eat.”