I love Chinese food! Not just because I am Chinese, but I love the cuisine because of its flavor and variety. Growing up in Hong Kong in a traditional Chinese family and then moving to the U.S. as a young adult, has allowed me to see the effects of each food culture on the health of its population. The differences between my traditional Chinese diet and the western diet are stark. As western diets spread, so too does the chronic health problems that accompany it.

I grew up accustomed to the style of Chinese food from the southern region of China. We had rice at every meal, with vegetables and a meat or fish dish. Oh the soup! We had soup at the end of the meal – usually a clear broth with some vegetables cooked in it. Whether we ate at home or at restaurants, it was a similar format. For snacks I would have some fruit candies, nuts or dried plums. A piece of chocolate was a special treat! There were no potato chips, caramel popcorns, or candy bars. Cuisines of other nationalities were not commonly available. With two meals a day and breakfast of buttered toast or rice porridge, there were no concerns of excess caloric intake. I was not limited by the type of food or the amount I ate.

A Typical Chinese Diet

By Michelle Kerns

Cooked Green Organic Edamame

Small dish of edamame beans

Image Credit: Jordanlye/iStock/Getty Images

A typical rural Chinese diet contains three times more fiber, 10 percent of the animal protein and less than half of the fat of the average American diet. People following this diet have lower blood cholesterol levels and are significantly less likely to die from heart disease. The traditional Chinese style of eating stresses grains, fresh produce and lean protein like seafood, all guidelines recommended by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

VIDEO OF THE DAY

High in Grains

Bowl of brown rice with chopsticks

Small bowl of brown rice

Image Credit: Mathisa\_s/iStock/Getty Images

Grains like rice and noodles form the base of nearly every meal in the Chinese diet. To follow a Chinese-style diet with the maximum amount of fiber, vitamins and minerals, choose whole grains such as brown rice and whole-grain pasta. Don't use added fats like butter when preparing or serving your grains. In addition, keep your portion size under control. One-half cup of cooked noodles or cereal grains like millet or rice counts as one serving.

Plenty of Produce

Bok choy (chinese cabbage) on a wooden table

Bowl of bok choy

Image Credit: olgakr/iStock/Getty Images

The typical Chinese diet includes a variety of fruits, vegetables, legumes, nuts and seeds each day. "Why the Chinese Don't Count Calories" author Lorraine Clissold points out that Chinese cuisine treats plant-only dishes as entrees, not side dishes as they often are deemed in Western culture. Common produce choices include bok choy, beans like edamame or mung, bean sprouts, eggplant, water chestnuts, soy, almonds, sesame seeds, peppers, dark leafy greens such as kale, yams, bitter melon, papaya, dragon fruit, cherries, kiwi, coconut, pineapple and dates. Filling half of your plate at each meal with raw or lightly cooked produce will help you eat in the Chinese manner.

Emphasis on Heart-Healthy Fats

Peanut oil

Small bottle of peanut oil

Image Credit: tashka2000/iStock/Getty Images

The traditional Chinese diet doesn't eliminate all fat, but it does incorporate mono- and polyunsaturated fats instead of animal-based oils high in saturated fat. Vegetable oils like peanut, canola and soybean are used in cooking and salad dressings, and sesame oil is often drizzled on top of finished dishes for added flavor. Other sources of healthy fats in a typical Chinese diet include nuts, seeds and the omega-3 fatty acids from fish and shellfish. Eating fewer processed and commercially baked goods also ensures a low intake of potentially harmful trans fats. Healthy adults following a Chinese diet should aim to consume no more than 6 to 7 teaspoons of healthy fats per day.

Limited Animal Products

Baked mackerel

Cooked mackerel on plate

Image Credit: VankaD/iStock/Getty Images

According to Oldways, the Chinese diet contains fish, shellfish and dairy products on an optional daily basis, some poultry and eggs weekly and red meats like beef or pork monthly, if at all. Limiting how much food you eat from animal sources -- especially red meat -- may significantly lower your risk of dying from heart disease, reported a study published in 2012 in the "Archives of Internal Medicine." When you do eat red meat, choose lean cuts that have less than 95 milligrams of cholesterol, 10 grams of total fat and 4.5 or fewer grams of saturated fat per serving. Opt for low- or nonfat dairy products over full-fat and have no more than four whole eggs per week.

Stick With Low-Sodium Condiments

ginger root

Ginger root

Image Credit: tashka2000/iStock/Getty Images

Garlic, ginger, ginseng, star anise, coriander, chilies, basil and fenugreek are all high-flavor, low-sodium herbs and spices used frequently as condiments or as flavoring in Chinese cooking. Use these more often than soy sauce or commercially available Asian condiments like hoisin sauce or chili-garlic sauce, which contain a high concentration of sodium per serving. If you choose to use these products, look for low-sodium brands and consume them in moderation.

Go Easy on Sweets

Mandarine orange

Small basket of mandarin oranges

Image Credit: leonori/iStock/Getty Images

The Chinese habit is to eat a high-sugar treat only about once weekly. Fresh fruit such as mangoes or mandarin oranges are a more common -- and healthier -- dessert option. Save traditional Chinese sweets like moon cakes, sticky rice balls, pastries, ice cream and hard candies for special occasions and keep your portions small.

Chinese Medicine Philosophy

Chinese culture is based on the philosophy of “yin” and “yang”, as well as the “Five Elements.” From medicine and martial arts to dance and cooking, Chinese culture is built on a foundation of balance, harmony, contrast, and adapting to change.

Part of that balance figures into food. Each organ is tied to an element and a taste. For example, bitter is tied to the heart and fire. (Also, sweet: spleen/earth, sour: liver/wood, spicy: lungs/metal, salty: kidneys/water.) In building a healthy meal, all five of these tastes should be incorporated. That is said to keep the body in balance, which in turn protects it from disease.

The Cultural Revolution

In order to understand where the Chinese diet stands today, you have to understand the country’s history. For thousands of years, the concept of balance from Chinese philosophy kept Chinese communities from straying from the traditional diet. There were always periods of famine and periods of wealth, but without much industry or access to western food there was never a question of leaving behind the traditional diets. When food was available, it was prepared according to the recommendations of Chinese medicine.

This started to change in the late 1800s with the influx of western food habits, the principle result of which was the historical change from whole brown rice to polished (refined) white rice. In 1949, widespread famine killed millions in China. There had been famine before, but at the end of this famine there was a dramatic shift in the way people grew and imported food and ate. Cereal consumption shot up in 1952, as did pork and “junk” food consumption. The proportion of energy intake from fat tripled, and by 1982 China saw its first significant rise in the number of overweight people and those stricken with diet-related cancers.

Looking for Wisdom in the Past

Many blame China’s shift into unhealthy eating habits on the availability of western foods. Particularly in cities, the Chinese diet today has shifted towards fats and sodium. Food is steamed, baked, and boiled less frequently than it was in the past, and there is far more snacking and eating outside of the house (an idea that was unheard of before the new millennium).

Much like those who are demanding the Mediterranean diet and the Nordic diet, and very much like Native Americans of late, many Chinese people are now seeking a return to their traditional diet. Though it only fell by the wayside fewer than 70 years ago, we have already seen a decline in the general health of the population. Western eating habits have been picking away at long-held Chinese principles of balance and harmony in the kitchen, and it’s time we all—Chinese and otherwise—took a look at what the traditional Chinese diet has to offer.

How to Keep to the Traditional Chinese Diet:

Drink green tea

Green tea helps to hold off hunger, aid digestion, and fight free radicals, which cause heart disease and cancer. In China, it’s customary to leave the same leaves in a pot and simply add water when a person wants a second or third cup. That way, they take in less caffeine than they would from several tea bags used one after another, and avoid chemicals involved in tea bag production.

Give up dairy

Dairy is designed for infants, and ours is the only species that continues to drink milk into adulthood. Instead of relying on dairy for calcium, get it from green leafy vegetables, sesame seeds, and fermented soy curds made with calcium.

Choose white rice, not brown

Brown rice is white rice with a hull around it, but the nutrients in that hull have poor bioavailability. That means our bodies use up energy breaking them down. That said, the Chinese diet values moderation and balance. Instead of having white rice at all times, try to rotate between all the available grains.

Don’t count calories

Chinese medicine sees food as nourishment, not potential body fat. Instead of counting calories, the Chinese diet simply aims to include healthy foods. For example, an avocado may have more than 200 more calories than a diet soda. But no one is about to argue that the diet soda is better for you than the avocado! Stop thinking about math, and start thinking about nutrition.

Eat red meat in moderation

According to Chinese medicine, it’s a mistake to have too much red meat, and not everyone can do without it. Instead of giving up red meat altogether, the Chinese diet advises two ounces twice a week.

Bring balance to your dishes

According to Chinese medicine, meals should always balance ingredients that are yin (wet and moist) and yang (dry and crisp). Yin foods cool the body, and yang foods heat it up. Another way to think of it is this: yin foods are usually carbohydrates, and yang foods are usually proteins. By cooking a dish that includes both of these (e.g., grain noodles with mung beans), the combination of proteins and carbohydrates can help to stabilize blood sugar and insulin—keys to metabolic health.

Eat slowly, and stop when you feel full

This might be the hardest part of the Chinese diet, but it’s certainly one of the most important. A major problem with western diets today is the way we have tied eating to guilt. Instead of eating three good meals a day, we might skip breakfast and then give in to a pastry by 10am. We might eat vegetables all week, then binge on potato chips all weekend. The way many of us see food is in extremes, bouncing from hunger to excess every few hours.

The solution, according to the Chinese diet, is to never skip meals. To eat three complete, healthy meals every day, and to eat until you feel that you are full. Of course, there’s a caveat: you have to eat slowly. It takes the brain some time to signal that you feel full, so it’s very easy to overeat without realizing it if you’re in a rush. Sit down, take your time, and appreciate your meals until you know it’s time to stop.

Serve soup at every meal

Western foods are quite dry, and we make up for it by drinking plenty of water during and between meals. The Chinese diet takes a different approach. Their meals almost always include a soup-based dish, which helps to fill the stomach and control the appetite. If you can get a fermented soup (such as miso), all the better. Fermented soups are probiotics, which help to release nutrients from the foods you take in.

Rethink your “mains” and “sides”

In the US, meat is a main dish and vegetables are side dishes. But in China, vegetables are viewed as main courses. When you’re preparing a plate for dinner, try to think about what you’re paying the most attention to. Instead of a plate that is two-thirds meat and one-third vegetables, aim for a plate that is two-thirds vegetables and one-third meat. At the very least, half your meal should consist of vegetables.

Learn about Chinese medicine

There’s no substitute for a doctor when you’re actually ill, but under most circumstances we can all benefit from learning how natural vegetables, herbs, and spices can keep us healthy. For example, chilies can promote digestion and ginger eases nausea. Whether you believe in these cures or not, at the end of the day it’s just one more reason to make sure you take in plenty of healthy, natural foods.

Keeping the Chinese Diet doesn’t necessarily mean eating Chinese food all the time. In fact, if you aren’t prepared to cook it yourself and don’t have a reliable healthy outside source, you may be much better off avoiding it! You can make your own favorite dishes, whether they come from Mexico or your grandmother in Pennsylvania. The key to the Chinese diet isn’t wonton soup: it’s natural ingredients and balance.

Every time you buy and make something, focus on the unrefined, all-natural version. When you make something starchy, consider adding legumes. The next time you want a snack, boil a cup of green tea. Pile your plate with vegetables, and drink a cup of soup on the side. Strive for balance, whatever that means for you.

Chinese Medicine Diet

“I eat a healthy diet”. As an acupuncturist, I hear this statement often in response to asking people about their food choices. But what is a healthy diet? You might be surprised at the answer when a healthy diet is viewed through the lens of energetic balance. For a Chinese medicine practitioner, a traditional ‘healthy’ diet differs from modern nutritional advice. The Chinese Medicine diet is based on energetic principles such as damp natured, cold natured, and hot natured foods. By knowing the energetic nature of a food, you have the power to create good digestion, more balance, and healthy function.

Acupuncture aims to restore balance to your body when imbalance has caused pain or disease. Practitioners can utilize acupuncture or herbs, but may also recommend practices such as tai chi or dietary therapy. While these methods can heal disease by fixing imbalances, the main key is not allowing your body to become imbalanced in the first place. As a patient, you hold this valuable key in your hand every day. It’s called ‘the fork’.

Our nutritional counseling posts cover some basic principles that will help most people eat to achieve balance. My intention is to help you choose more balancing foods based on common energetic principles so you can create a foundation for healthy living.

Dampness in the Diet

Eating for balance has been a way of life for the Chinese for thousands of years. The concept of balance is ingrained in their cultural choices of what to eat and when to eat it. The Chinese diet includes well known spices such as ginger and common foods such as pearled barley. Ingredients are chosen for their medicinal value, as well as for nutrition and taste. The Chinese have long known that ginger helps with digestion and barley helps to drain dampness. Choosing herbs and spices that encourage proper digestion is easy to understand. But the Chinese diet aims for another principle unfamiliar to most Westerners, and that is preventing and draining dampness.

Dampness is a by-product of eating foods that clog the free flow of energy inside your body. Popular foods such as cheese, yogurt, white flour, and sugar are all culprits that cause dampness to form. Dampness causes stagnation which creates blockages in the body, resulting in pain and disease. Signs of accumulated dampness include mucus in the nose or lungs, digestive problems such as loose stools and constipation, excess weight, and swollen joints. Some common Western diseases that are associated with dampness include chronic allergies and arthritis. Dampness is difficult to treat once it accumulates so we want to eat in a way that prevents dampness from forming in the first place.

How Is Dampness Formed?

It is helpful to examine how dampness is formed. Have you ever thought about how food is processed inside your body? For over 2,000 years, the Chinese have observed the digestive process and declared proper digestion the cornerstone of the Chinese Medicine system and the foundation of good health. The digestive system is where the accumulation of dampness begins.

When food enters your mouth, it travels through your stomach and intestines. Here, energy or life force is extracted from the food and the waste products are expelled at the other end. The food energy that was extracted becomes your essential life force, providing the fuel you need to live every day. Digestion should be an unnoticeable event. Your digestive system should be quiet and clean burning to extract the most nutrition and energy from your food. ‘Clean burning’ is likened to metabolism. If you properly metabolize the foods that you ingest, the food is efficiently used and there is no leftover residue after the waste is excreted. If the system becomes clogged, however, the energy does not get adequately separated from the foodstuffs and although you excrete wastes, there is leftover residue that sticks to various places within the body. This residue is considered ‘dampness’ and affects your body’s functions in various ways.

Accumulated dampness clogs organs such as the lungs, causing allergies or asthma. When it clogs the digestive tract, indigestion or bowel problems can develop. Damp can also be ‘hidden’ and block meridians (the channels we use in acupuncture treatment that carry life force) leading to pain and stiffness or even swollen joints. Over time, dampness can become warm and create the diseases of inflammation such as arthritis, high cholesterol, and diabetes. Understanding and addressing dampness is one of the keys to treating disease in Chinese Medicine. Because it is so difficult to remove once it has accumulated, you can see the importance of not letting this dampness develop in the first place.

How do we choose foods that prevent dampness, facilitate good digestion, and allow free flowing energy? Here’s where the wisdom of selecting foods based on their energetic properties comes in. This is simpler than you may imagine. Foods that can be found in any grocery store form the foundation of the healthy Chinese Medicine diet.

What Types of Food Can I Eat?

Think of the typical menu you’ve seen in Chinese restaurants. The meals are built around steamed rice, cooked vegetables, and small quantities of animal protein or beans. In quality Chinese restaurants, the amount of cooking oils used will be low. If you skip the deep-fried choices and those made with flour products (think dumplings and wheat noodles), you have the basic Chinese Medicine diet – a diet that helps to maintain balance in the body at any age.

Cooked Vegetables

Have you ever noticed the quantity of vegetables on a typical plate of Chinese food? You are usually served a heaping plate of lightly cooked vegetables when you order a dish that includes vegetables in a Chinese restaurant. Vegetables play a major role in draining dampness and are packed with life giving nutrition. A variety of colors and textures create a combination that is both pleasing to the eye and to the palate. Taste and texture play an important role in regulating appetite. A wide variety ensures satiety, so you feel full. Varied colors provide a broad array of nutrients and antioxidants to promote health and longevity. Your plate should begin with a large quantity of lightly cooked vegetables. A good guideline is to fill half your plate with vegetables. You will want to include lots of leafy greens as these are one of the most balancing and nutrient dense foods you can eat.

Non Gluten Starches

Rice is a balanced food which is easily digested. In my allergic patients, rice is a recommended carbohydrate to help them reduce symptoms while undergoing allergy treatments because it is so gentle to the digestive system. White or brown rice are interchangeable depending on which one digests most easily for you. White rice tends to be more cleansing while brown rice is considered more nourishing. Other wheat-free, non-glutinous grains include millet and quinoa. These are considered ‘clean burning’ foods in Chinese Medicine, that gently drain dampness from the body. Rice, quinoa, or millet should fill one quarter of your plate or less.

Protein

Small quantities of animal protein or beans are included in the Chinese diet. The animal proteins are ‘building’ foods and can be difficult to digest hence the emphasis on ‘small’. A serving size of animal protein is typically 2-4 ounces 3-4 times per week. Beans can be eaten more often as they absorb dampness and provide fiber and protein. Your protein choice should fill the other quarter of your plate.

Limit Cold Raw Food

One food you will find very little of on the Chinese Medicine diet is raw, cold food. This includes salads and chilled food, iced drinks, and frozen foods. Cold, raw foods are culprits in the formation of damp because they are difficult to process. For your digestive system to extract the essence of food, it must ensure the food is warmed up to body temperature before it can begin breaking it down. Heating the food inside your body strains your energetic resources, weakening your energy system over time. Lightly cooked vegetables and well-cooked grains allow your digestive system to immediately begin extracting energy without first having to heat the food to body temperature. Even though raw foods such as those found in salads contain slightly more enzymes and nutrients, the net gain is less than that of cooked vegetables as you lose energy to the internal heating process while trying to assimilate these foods.

Eliminate Dairy

Notice that there is no cheese, butter, or milk on the Chinese menu. One of the reasons is the tendency of these foods to create dampness. Even if heated, dairy’s energetic nature is cold and hinders digestion. Chinese Medicine considers dairy to be a building food, only suitable for undernourished people. This makes dairy very stagnating if you are already well fed.

In a culture concerned about calcium, we have been led to believe that dairy is the only source of this bone building mineral. However, foods such as almonds, salmon, leafy greens, and broccoli are high in calcium and other minerals that are equally important in the formation of strong bones. Your calcium needs will be easily met by eating several servings of vegetables per day and adding foods like salmon and almonds to your diet each week.

Eliminate Sugar

Concentrated sweets such as soda, candy, sweetened yogurt, and energy bars, quickly create damp. The flavor of ‘sweet’ is considered nourishing in Chinese dietary therapy but the ‘sweet flavor’ applies to foods like rice, beef, and vegetables, not concentrated sugars. If vegetables are considered sweet, you can imagine the intense sweetness of a piece of chocolate cake. The sweet flavor of rice, meat, and vegetables benefits the digestive organs. Concentrated sweets such as sugar, impair the body’s ability to transform food into energy and to transport the wastes for elimination. Incompletely transformed food becomes dampness, accumulating over time to produce blockage and disease.

The 5 Flavors are sweet, sour, pungent, bitter, and salty. Balancing these flavors in accordance with your individual body type, disease pattern, and season are all part of Chinese dietary therapy. This is a complex subject that can be explored in the book The Tao of Healthy Eating: Dietary Wisdom According to Traditional Chinese Medicine by Bob Flaws

Eat According to the Seasons

Different seasons of the year require modified cooking methods and different food choices. People naturally eat more warming, heavier foods in the winter, like soups, stews, and baked foods. Conversely, in summer we are drawn to lighter, cooler types of foods that are more quickly cooked, like steamed vegetables. Varying your food choices according to seasons is a way to keep your body in sync with the natural environment. Eating warmer foods when the weather is cold and cooler foods during the summer months keeps you healthy in all seasons.

Likewise, eating in accordance with what grows in your region will keep your body in balance. For instance, someone who lives near the equator where the weather is warm all year around would eat different foods than people who live in cold, northern climates. People in tropical regions would naturally be near tropical fruits since they grow in that type of climate. Those living in the north, say high in the mountains, would never naturally see a tropical fruit growing in their area so should probably avoid them.

One of my favorite herbal educators, Bob Flaws, says that the modern diet is a ‘recent aberration in the history of the human diet’ that has only developed over the last 50 years. Many modern food choices would not exist in the absence of fast global transportation and indoor refrigeration. If you think about it, humans evolved eating what was locally available and in season. Preservation methods evolved but these methods usually involved cooking. The modern grocery store is like having an in season garden all year. Foods like watermelons, pineapples, and grapes are always available at your local grocery. But these are foods you might never find growing where you live and consuming them freely will lead to imbalances over time.

Eating local foods in season is still a common practice in many parts of the world. Indigenous cultures that produce many centenarians (people living past 100 years) have been studied for their dietary practices to find the key to their health and longevity. Scientists have tried to isolate which specific foods these people are eating to find the secret to their long, healthy lives. Many of these studies, however, seem to overlook the obvious fact that Indigenous people aren’t eating foods grown outside their region. Additionally, when you view the diets in longevity studies through the lens of Chinese Medicine dietary therapy, there are many similarities between their food choices. Especially noticeable are the larger proportion of locally grown vegetables, rice, whole grains, an absence of sugar or processed food, and smaller quantities of protein than their Western counterparts.

Now that we have covered some basics regarding the Chinese medicine diet and the concept of dampness, you can begin to make choices that will provide you with more years to your life and more life to your years.

If you’re feeling inspired and want to eat according to the natural principles of balance discussed here, please read Chinese Medicine Foods to Eat and Chinese Medicine Sample Meals. Make the switch to a harmonious way of eating and living.