

## **Healthy Eating for Everyone:**

I spend time with all new patients discussing their diet. Food plays such an important role because it is something we are putting into our bodies everyday. Chinese Medicine places great focus on diet and healthy digestive function because in addition to the air we breathe, food is where we get most of our energy. Of course, the right foods can make us healthier and feel better, while the wrong foods will do the opposite.

There are many recommendations that I give that are specific to the individual. This is because we all have different body chemistry, constitutions and susceptibilities. What works for some, will not work for others, and vice versa. If someone has too much phlegm in their body, I will often recommend eating less dairy, sugar and processed food. If you are cold all the time, adding things like ginger and cinnamon can help warm you up. If a patient has constipation and heart issues, then ground flax seeds might be a great addition to their routine. The possibilities are endless. In this article however, I would like to share some recommendations that I give to almost everyone, regardless of age, body type or state of health.

## **Whole Foods and Eating Clean:**

Eating a “whole” food diet is the most important recommendation I can give. A whole food is one that is as close to its original form as possible. It could still be dried or cooked but it has nothing taken away or added to it. The opposite of a whole food is something like white flour or white sugar. To make white flour for example, the wheat kernel is stripped of nutrient and fibre rich components like the bran and germ, and then even bleached, turning it into something far different from the “whole” grain it once was. In general, once foods have been processed and packaged they lose nutrients and vitality. They often require additives and preservatives to lengthen shelf life or improve taste and visual appeal, none of which are beneficial for our consumption. Eating whole foods is not a fad, it always has been and always will be the simplest, purest and healthiest way to eat.

Comparisons: ✓ whole grain brown rice    ✗ minute rice    ✗ rice cake  
                  ✓ sprouted grain bread    ✗ plain white loaf    ✗✗ donut  
                  ✓ whole wheat pasta    ✗ plain pasta    ✗✗ Mr. Noodles  
                  ✓ steel cut or rolled oats    ✓ homemade granola    ✗ cereal    ✗ minute oats  
                  ✓ fresh peas    ✗ canned peas  
                  ✓ baked potato    ✗ potato chips  
                  ✓ grapes    ✗ grape juice    ✗ fruit roll up    ✗✗ a purple popsicle  
                  ✓ chicken breast    ✗ cold cuts    ✗✗ hot dogs    ✗✗ chicken McNuggets  
                  ✓ nut butter (100% nuts)    ✗✗ Skippy, Kraft, etc  
                  ✓ plain yogurt 2% with fresh blueberries    ✗ fat free blueberry flavoured yogurt  
                  ✓ cheese    ✗ processed cheese slices    ✗ cheese whiz  
                  ✓ cold pressed olive oil    ✗ refined canola oil    ✗ vegetable oil

If and when you are buying packaged foods, it is always wise to check the ingredients. I once noticed an ingredient list on a bag of local BC apples. We would all like to think it should simply read “apples”. Even I was surprised that there were actually 5 ingredients, one of which was petroleum! Avoid foods with ingredients that you do not either recognize or know how to pronounce. In some cases they can be vitamins but more often than not they are some type of preservative, artificial flavour, colouring, or additive and are not anything we are really meant to ingest. When buying packaged foods, choose those with the fewest ingredients. Hydrogenated fats, trans-fats or poor quality oils are also ingredients that are best to completely avoid. Avoid deep fried foods for the same reason.

### **Eat your Veggies:**

In general, fruit and vegetables can always be emphasized as the most essential part of a healthy diet. The vegetables are paramount only because the naturally occurring sugars in fruits can be detrimental for some. There are also certain vegetables that may be less perfect for specific health problems but in general more vegetables are always a good thing. Vegetables are packed with nutrients, fibre, antioxidants, and all sorts of goodness.

Eating a primarily plant based diet is also a good idea, regardless of your ethical viewpoint of eating meat. Again, some big advantages are more fibre as well as the nutrient density and the healing properties of so many fruits and vegetables. Many studies have shown the benefits of reducing intake of red meat, animal proteins and saturated fats. Even dairy is highly controversial. In a slightly different category, fish is also an excellent protein source but it also provides healthy fats and therefore can be a beneficial inclusion to the diet. Actually, nowadays, we have so many vegetarian alternatives for protein sources. If you look at the staples of some major cultures around the world we can see such examples, like tofu or lentils with rice, corn and beans, hummus and pita, and so on.

### **Avoid Sugar and Refined Carbohydrates:**

A big one to look out for is sugar. Sugar and other refined carbohydrates are the primary source of increased obesity, diabetes, heart disease and a variety of other inflammatory and debilitating disorders in the modern world. Refined carbohydrates rapidly increase blood sugar and eventually body weight, while decreasing your immune system and generally reeking havoc within your body. You can check the glycemic index of any food, either in books or online. The higher the number, the more rapidly it raises blood sugar and the worse it is for you. Any kind of soft drink, juice, candy, cookie, cake, baked good, chips or junk food will of course be very high on the list. When checking ingredients also watch for sugar that can be hidden in a variety of forms, which may or may not have sugar in the name. For example: glucose, sucrose, dextrose (or anything ending in ‘ose’), high-fructose corn syrup, evaporated cane sugar or cane syrup, sorbitol, etc. This is not to mention artificial sweeteners, which may be even worse.

**Eat Less:**

Many studies on longevity have shown that eating less is a key factor in healthy aging. Many of us eat more calories than we actually need for optimal function. Having too much to eat is just as bad, or worse, than not having enough. When we overeat our metabolism slows down both physically and cognitively. Our digestive system has to work extra hard, which can then weaken or obstruct its healthy function. Eating only up to 80% of feeling full may be a great recommendation to go by.

Something to consider, in addition to eliminating junk food, is limiting your intake of complex carbohydrates, like breads, grains, pasta, potatoes and rice. Doing so can actually make you feel lighter, sharper and as if you have more energy simply because you will be less sluggish. Carb loading is useful if you are a marathon runner or if you don't know when your next meal might be, but its not so important if you are sitting at a desk all day.

Eating late at night or too close to bed is also not ideal. During sleep our metabolism slows down and so does our gastrointestinal function. At night is also when our digestive system recharges itself, and it cannot if it is busy digesting food most of the night.

Slow down and be mindful when eating. Much of digestion starts in the mouth, so chewing your food thoroughly makes a big difference on how well you digest and ultimately what you get out of your food. Avoid eating while in a rush or eating while working. Eating more slowly also helps you recognize when you are getting full before you have gone too far.

**Find the Balance and Trust Your Instincts:**

Another key to healthy nutrition is to maintain a balanced diet. Chinese Medicine always strives for keeping the balance and taking nothing to the extreme. This includes eating all foods in moderation and not being overly strict in any sense. Even moderation should be in moderation! Keep some variety in your meals. If you notice eating a certain food or a certain flavour more often, try something different. Mix it up a little, try new foods and new recipes, have fun with it. Most importantly, take the time to taste, enjoy and savour your food!

There are so many other factors to a healthy diet like:

- ✓ getting adequate fluids
- ✓ minimizing salt / sodium
- ✓ limiting coffee and alcohol
- ✓ eating organic (especially when it comes to meat and dairy)
- ✓ supporting locally grown foods (this is also good for the environment)
- ✓ identifying any food allergies or intolerances
- ✓ eating seasonally
- ✓ eating or avoiding foods in relation to your constitution or current state of health
- ✓ and there is so much more . . .

There are so many diets and perspectives out there, take a little from every one and find what works for you. Most importantly, trust your body and your instincts. Don't only rely on what someone else recommends, what you read, or what worked for someone else. Whether you are trying something new or cutting something out, be mindful of how your body feels when you make that change. Ultimately do what works for you.

If you have any questions about this article or questions that have arisen from it, please ask me, I am here to help. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

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