Department of Health

Health Preservation by food in Chinese medicine – The five cereals, fruits and vegetables

The five cereals

Vegetables

Fruits

In Chinese medicine, great stress is laid on health preservation by food. Diet should be allocated in accordance with nature and function of food in order to achieve the goals of preserving body constitution, maintaining good health, preventing disease and prolonging life.

The natures of food

In Chinese medicine, food can be classified into "four qi" and "five flavours". The main functions of food are to replenish nutrients, benefit qi and supplement blood, regulate the balance between yin and yang in the human body as well as organ functions.

1.The four qi

The four qi refer to four natures, namely cold, coolness, warmness and hot. Foods of a milder nature are known as "neutral". Foods of different natures have different functions on the human body. For example, cold and cool foods such as mung bean, Chinese celery and watermelon usually possess cooling effect to have the function of cleaning away heat while warm and hot foods such as chive, mutton and chilli can keep out the cold. Neutral foods such as whole rice, soybean, carp and strawberry, which are of a mild nature, are suitable for people with different body constitutions.

2.The five flavours

Food can be classified into five flavours, namely sourness, bitterness, sweetness, pungency and saltiness, according to their tastes or functions. Foods light in taste are those with unapparent flavour. Foods of different properties have specific functions on different organs of the human body.

Sour (including astringent flavour) food can constrain sweating, arrest cough or stop diarrhea. For example, smoked plum and pomegranate can quench thirst or relieve diarrhea symptoms due to deficiency and coldness in the spleen and stomach.

Bitter food can help drying and dampness, and induce purgation. For instance, bitter cucumber, which is bitter in flavour and cold in nature, can clear away heat and eliminate dampness.

Pungent food, such as green onion and ginger, can recuperate qi and blood as well as dispensing and relieving the exterior.

Salty food can nourish and supplement the kidney, and have softening or laxative characters. For example, kelp can soften phlegm.

Sweety food, such as red dates, can supplement qi and benefit blood.

Light taste food, such as adsuki bean, can promote diuresis and eliminate dampness.

Principles of health preservation by food

In Chinese medicine, food should be matched with one another. "The five cereals are for nutrition, the five vegetables aid recuperation, the five poultries are used as invigorators, the five fruits are used as supplements". This means cereals should be taken as the major dietary source, vegetables as complementary source, meat as subsidiary source and fruit as supplementing nutrients.

Also, some basic principles should be observed to achieve health preservation by food. These include taking meals regularly, in adequate amounts and with appropriate temperature. Only a diet which blends the five flavours and include both meat and vegetables can supplement the various nutrients necessary for the human body whilst the spleen and stomach should also be preserved. Moreover, different food should be selected in accordance with different seasons, environment, age, gender and body constitution (please refer to the appendix for details).

Health preservation by food – The five cereals

The "five cereals" is a general term referring to grains, which include cereals and beans. In Chinese medicine, most cereals and beans are sweet in taste and neutral in nature, therefore can invigorate the spleen and stomach. Yet, some food have their specific properties, for example, glutinous rice is sweet in taste and warm in nature. It can warm the spleen and stomach, benefit qi and constrain sweating. On the other hand, mung bean is sweet in taste and cold in nature. It can clear away summer heat, promote diuresis and eliminate toxic. The following cereals and beans are recommended for daily consumption:

[Glutinous rice] is sweet in taste and warm in nature. It can invigorate the spleen and benefit qi, warm the stomach, arrest diarrhea and constrain sweating. Glutinous rice can be used to make congee, steamed rice, make sugar through decocting or brew wine. People with deficiency and cold in the spleen and stomach can eat glutinous rice frequently, which helps to alleviate diarrhea due to deficiency in the spleen, spontaneous sweating and lacking in strength.

[Corn] is sweet in taste and neutral in nature. It can invigorate the spleen and stomach, eliminate dampness and promote diuresis. Corn can be steamed or used to make noodles. Congee made with corn is recuperative after recovery from illness, and even a health food for the middle- and old-aged. Soup made with corn can be used for people with weak spleen and stomach, reduction in food consumption or diarrhea, etc.

[Job's tears] is sweet, light in taste and slightly cold in nature. Congee made with Job's tears can supplement the spleen, regulate the stomach, promote diuresis to eliminate dampness, prevent and cure diarrhea with loose stool, anxiety, thirst, dampness and oedema, etc. Fried Job's tears can be used for diarrhea due to deficiency in the spleen with dampness. Raw Job's tears, when made with boiling water, can clear away heat and dampness as well as oedema.

[Soybean] is sweet in taste and neutral in nature. Soybean, served as food or ground to make soybean milk as beverage, can invigorate the spleen, benefit qi, replenish blood, soothe the heart and strengthen the body constitution. Food tonics effects can be achieved on health problems such as being thin and weak, tiredness and insufficiency of breast milk secretion.

- [Black bean] is sweet in taste and neutral in nature. Black bean is rich in nutrients and when boiled, it can nourish yin, supplement the kidney, nourish blood, nourish the liver, improve eyesight and keep the hair black. Frequent consumption of black bean can strengthen the body constitution and slow down ageing. Cooked black bean can also clear away stomach heat, regulate the spleen and stomach as well as promoting purgation.

- [Adsuki bean] is sweet in taste and neutral in nature. When used to make congee, it can invigorate the spleen, eliminate dampness, activate blood circulation and eliminate toxin.

- [Mung bean] is sweet in taste and cold in nature. Mung bean can be used to make congee and rice, which have the functions of clearing away heat and removing vexation, dispersing summer heat, promoting the production of the body fluids, resolving oedema, invigorating the spleen, benefiting qi and eliminating toxin.

Health preservation by food – Vegetables

In Chinese medicine, vegetables can promote digestion and replenish nutrients. Some vegetables are pungent in taste and warm in nature. For example, garlic, ginger can warm the stomach and expel wind and cold. Some vegetables are sweet in flavour and cold in nature. For example, Chinese celery and lotus root can eliminate toxic materials of the intestine and stomach.

[White cabbage] is small Chinese cabbage cultivated in the south, which is sweet in taste and slightly cold in nature. It can relieve the heat of the lung and stomach, as well as promote digestion and purgation.

[Mustard] is pungent in taste and warm in nature. It can invigorate the spleen and warm the stomach, promote digestion, dissolve phlegm, activate qi, dissipate cold and relieve exterior syndrome.

[Spinach] is sweet in taste and cool in nature. It can clear the intestine and stomach, promote the production of the body fluids, quench thirst, nourish the liver and improve eyesight.

[Radish] White radish is sweet in taste and cool in nature. It can clear away heat and promote the production of the body fluids, dissolve phlegm, relieve cough and promote digestion. Carrot is sweet in taste and neutral in nature. It can moisturise the lung, promote the production of the body fluids, nourish the liver and improve eyesight.

[Chive] is pungent in taste and warm in nature. It can supplement the kidney and assist yang, warm and stimulate the stomach, activate qi and remove blood stasis.

[Wax gourd] is sweet, light in taste and slightly cold in nature. It can clear away heat and eliminate toxin, quench thirst, relieve fidgety and promote diuresis. Thus it is a desirable vegetable in summer. Besides its flesh can be used as chowder, its peel can be boiled and consumed as tea, which can relieve summer heat and promote diuresis, rendering it suitable for problems such as summer heat, vexation and thirst.

[Silky gourd] is sweet in taste and cool in nature. It can clear away heat and dissolve phlegm, making it especially suitable for people with heat, restlessness, thirst, lung heat and cough.

[Bitter cucumber] is bitter and sweet in taste but cold in nature, can clear away heat, relieve summer heat, clear the liver and improve eyesight. It is most suitable for people with damp heat and excess of Liver-fire.

[Mushroom] is commonly known as dried mushroom, is sweet in taste and neutral in nature. It can invigorate the spleen, regulate the stomach, supplement qi and benefit the kidney. Mushroom is most suitable for people with deficiency in the spleen and stomach as well as poor appetite. The body constitution can be strengthened after persistent consumption.

Health preservation by food – Fruits

In Chinese medicine, fruits can replenish the deficiency of the major diet and provide the necessary nutrients to the body. Most fruits are sweet, sour in taste and slightly cold in nature. For example, pear, sugarcane, olive can nourish yin, promote the production of the body fluids and clear away heat. Some fruits are sweet in taste and warm in nature. For example, lychee, longan and chestnut can replenish qi, nourish blood, invigorate the spleen and supplement the kidney.

[Apple] is sweet in taste and cool in nature. It can nourish the spleen, stimulate the stomach, promote digestion, moisturise the lung, dissolve phlegm and relieve cough. Apple peel can also stop diarrhea.

[Pear] is sweet, slightly sour in taste and cold in nature. It can clear away heat, promote the production of the body fluids, moisturise the lung, dissolve phlegm and relieve cough. Pear stewed with crystal sugar is also suitable for people suffering from cough due to lung dryness.

[Papaya], consumed as fruit in the south, is sweet in taste and neutral in nature. It can invigorate the spleen, benefit qi, moisturise the lung, relieve cough and promote the secretion of breastmilk, so it is most suitable for mother who breastfeed as well as people who cough due to lung deficiency.

[Persimmon] is sweet, astringent in taste and slightly cold in nature. It can moisturise the lung, relieve cough, promote the production of the body fluids to quench thirst. Being dried in the sun, it becomes dried persimmon which is sweet in taste and neutral in nature. It can moisturise the heart and lung and benefit the intestine and stomach. The white frost on the dried persimmon is called persimmon frost. Being sweet in taste and cool in nature, persimmon frost can clear away heat, moisturise dryness, dissolve phlegm and relieve cough. It can also relieve lung heat, cough due to dryness, as well as dry and sore throat.

[Tangerine] is sweet, sour in taste and cool in nature. It can moisturise the lung, promote the production of the body fluids, regulate the circulation of qi and stimulate the stomach. Its peel, called Chenpi which is pungent in taste and warm in nature, can regulate the circulation of qi, invigorate the spleen, regulate the stomach, relieve vomiting, dry dampness and dissolve phlegm. Orange, pomelo and tangerine are similar in nature. Orange can moisturise the lung and dissolve phlegm whilst pomelo can promote digestion.

[Longan] is sweet in taste and slightly warm in nature. It can supplement and benefit the heart and spleen, promote the production of the body fluids, moisturise dryness, quiet the heart and spirit. It can also be used for problems like deficiency in the heart and spleen, palpitation and insomnia due to deficiency in blood and qi.

[Grape] is sour, sweet in taste and neutral in nature. It can benefit qi and blood, supplement the liver and kidney, invigorate the spleen and stomach and promote diuresis. Thus, it is a desirable fruit for nourishing.

[Watermelon] is sweet in taste and cold in nature. It can clear away summer heat, promote the production of the body fluids to quench thirst and promote diuresis. Thus, it is a suitable fruit for consumption in summer.

Appendix: Different types of body constitution

[Yang and hot type] Usually have slim and sturdy body shape, rather reddish facial complexion and lips, get annoyed easily, prefer coldness to high temperature etc.

[Deficiency and cold type] Usually have pale and whitish facial complexion and lips, sometimes have poor appetite, have flat taste in the mouth, get tired easily, prefer warmth and be afraid of coldness, stools are thin, etc.

[Yin deficiency and interior heat type] Tend to suffer from hectic fever and night sweating, the body is thin with dry mouth and throat, have heat effusion in the heart of the palms and soles, suffer from restlessness and insomnia easily, stools are dry and hard.

[Phlegm and damp type] Usually have fat body shape, look fatigued, being drowsy and reluctant to move, prefer greasy food and experience sticky and slimy sensation in the mouth.

If you have doubt about your body constitution or health preservation by food , please consult a Chinese medicine practitioner.

More Health Information of Chinese Medicine

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