

HEALTH

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TCM

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Eat to live well

Obesity rates have risen dramatically in developed countries over the years. It's well-known that inappropriate high fat and unbalanced diets are partially responsible for the diseases that rank among the top killers – such as heart disease and certain cancers.

In Chinese culture, food is taken seriously and is considered to be more than just sustenance.

Diet is also thought of as a therapeutic tool and as a first line of defence in the treatment of many ailments.

"We are what we eat," is a concept wholly embraced by the Chinese.

The dietary guidelines are largely based on nature and climatic changes as well as a person's body constitution.

It's common and practical to consume a variety of different foods, according to the season, so that people can remain in harmony with the environment, adapt better to seasonal changes and stay healthy.

In spring and summer, the ancient Chinese saw that yang *chi* (the body's vital force or functional aspects in general) tended to flow outward and occupy the body's surface, which in turn would deplete the internal supply.

While humidity and heat cause plants to grow fast, with people it may cause excessive perspiration, a sign the body's *chi* and blood have become more vigorous.

The metabolic rate also peaks during summer, as excessive

yang flows outward or overcomes yin internally. Therefore in summer, it's important to maintain normal levels of yang and this can be achieved through diet.

According to the five elements theory, summer corresponds to the heart and fire elements. Hyperactivity of the heart (fire element), which is common in

summer, inhibits the normal functions of the lungs (metal element), affecting normal perspiration and general *chi* distribution in the body.

It's advised to eat more foods with pungent flavours – hot in energy and tending to move outward – and reduce bitter flavours. Pungent flavours are associated with the metal

element and therefore will promote lung function while bitter flavours – which can include things such as asparagus, wild cucumber, coffee, lettuce and vinegar – are associated with the heart and fire element.

Adding pungent foods to diet helps thermo-regulate the body and depress a hyper-functioning heart, which may cause agitation,

sleep disruptions and oral ulcers. Samples of pungent foods that should be included in cooking include ginger, onion, pepper, garlic, castor beans, chives, cinnamon, cloves, Chinese parsley, taro, leaf mustard, nutmeg, fennel, kumquats, peppermint, rice bran, leeks, marjoram, radishes, rosemary, soybean oil, sweet basil and wine.

People should also avoid eating greasy, raw and frozen foods as they are believed to increase the workload of the digestive system.

In traditional Chinese medicine terms, they can be harmful to the transformation and transportation functions of the spleen and stomach, which lead to symptoms such as a poor appetite, diarrhoea or stomach upsets. Warm and cooked foods are thought to protect organ function more effectively.