

HEALTH

Edited by Suzanne Harrison suzanne.harrison@scmp.com

TCM

Rose Tse and Angela Collingwood
info@shen-nong.com

Winter warmers

According to the lunar calendar, winter starts on November 7 and lasts until February 4. During the cold, many living things slow down to save energy; some animals go into hibernation. It's also the season when humans conserve energy and build strength for spring.

In the *Suwen* (Book of Plain Questions) it's said: "The three

months of winter are a season for storage and sealing up, with rivers iced over and land frozen with cracks. Do not disturb the yang *chi* in this season.

"Sleep early at sunset and get up late after sunrise. Let your spirit be calm as if it is in hiding, and as if you have some private matter to keep from each other.

"Don't let the skin overly perspire to prevent the internal yang *chi* from being affected. These are the health-preserving ways to conserve energy in winter. Violating them will impair the kidneys and, when spring comes, you will suffer from flaccidity and cold limbs."

Diet in winter is adapted to focus on enriching yin and subduing yang to aid the body's ability to combat environmental changes. Enriching yin and subduing yang means eating fats and high protein foods that retain warmth, such as mutton, beef, goose, duck, eggs, rabbit, Chinese yam, glutinous rice, dates, longans, black fungus, bamboo shoots, mushrooms and leek.

Winter corresponds to the kidneys, according to the Chinese five elements theory. Hyperactive kidneys can inhibit normal functions of the heart, leading to heart palpitations, cardiac pain, cold limbs and fatigue.

Eat more foods with bitter flavours while reducing salty flavours to help promote healthy heart function and reduce the workload of the kidneys.

Bitter foods include apricot seeds, asparagus, bitter gourd, wild cucumber, celery, cherry seeds, coffee, grapefruit, hops, kohlrabi, lettuce and wine.

However, eating too many hotpot meals and high caloric foods can cause excessive heat (more than is needed for winter warming) to accumulate in the lungs and stomach.

Excessive heat in winter may lead to bronchitis, sore throats, peptic ulcers and skin problems.

Warming foods need to be balanced with a certain amount of cool dishes and water in winter.

Winter is also a good time to boost your constitution and improve symptoms associated with chronic conditions.

Since the appetite tends to increase over winter with a lower metabolic rate, absorbed nutrients from food can be stored more easily. Energising herbs such as ginseng, wolfberry, angelica, rehmannia root, astragalus and medicinal mushrooms can be used for this purpose. It's a trend for Chinese restaurants to prepare various medicinal courses using these ingredients.

Traditionally, red-date glutinous rice congee is a popular breakfast in winter because it's said to encourage the spleen to produce more nutrient essence for the production of blood and *chi*.

The ingredients are yam (40g), Job's tear (50g), red dates (10g), glutinous rice (250g) and rock sugar (40g). Rinse the ingredients and boil with 2,500ml water. Bring the congee to a boil, then reduce the heat to a brisk simmer for 45-50 minutes until the ingredients are soft and soupy. Serves four.

Before taking any medicine, consult your TCM or medical practitioner