

HEALTH

Edited by Suzanne Harrison
suzanne.harrison@scmp.com

TCM: matter of taste

Sometimes we become aware of a bad taste in the mouth - it may be metallic, fishy or bitter. It's not necessarily related to something we have eaten, but may be a sign of an underlying medical condition. Taste is a complex sensing mechanism and unique to each person. The sense of taste is influenced by factors such as oral condition, nutrient intake and culture.

The Chinese have long realised the inner health of the body can be gauged by examination of external signs and sensations. This is why a TCM practitioner spends a long period during clinical examination questioning, inspecting, palpating, listening and smelling before arriving at a diagnosis.

Although all parts of the body are linked to each other, some organs, such as the spleen and heart, have a close relationship with the tongue and lips, and therefore taste. Through their respective meridians, the heart and spleen "open into" the tongue or the mouth, so the health of these organs is vital in maintaining a normal appearance and a balanced sense of taste. An abnormal taste in the mouth may occur with other symptoms or by itself.

A decrease in the ability to taste foods indicates spleen weakness, usually resulting from serious gastrointestinal problems. Cardamon seed and germinated barley are used to recover a sense of taste. Hot, rainy days may make us feel tired, and a bland taste and a dry mouth can occur. Herbs such as agastache and atractylodes rhizome may be used to treat these summer ailments.

A bitter taste in the mouth is often a sign of excess heat. When heat accumulates in the liver and gall bladder, bloodshot eyes and lightheadedness will also occur. Chinese gentian root, baical skullcap root and gardenia fruit should be used to clear the heat.

However, when insomniacs experience a bitter taste in the mouth, it means heat has disturbed the heart and gallbladder, indicating that herbs such as golden thread rhizome and bamboo shavings should be used.

A sour taste can be due to heartburn, since this releases acids from the stomach, burning the oesophagus and leaving a horrible aftertaste. TCM physicians may use

Chinese gentian root and amur cork tree bark to cool the stomach and liver. A sour taste accompanied by bad breath usually results from indigestion, and herbs such as hawthorn fruit, medicated leaven and radish seed can help.

Having a spicy or numb feeling in the mouth without eating spicy food can indicate respiratory conditions such as tracheitis and lung abscesses. When there is also a fishy taste, with dryness, coughing and sticky yellow phlegm, TCM physicians may use wolfberry root-bark and mulberry root-bark to treat the condition.

Kidney deficiency is associated with a salty taste in the mouth. When accompanied by mouth dryness and hot flushes, anemarrhena rhizome and processed rehmannia root can be used to nourish the kidney.

For coughs with salty phlegm, poria and processed liquorice root can be selected. Excessive salty saliva and limb coldness should use aconite root and water-plantain rhizome.

Predilections for certain foods and tastes are not only affected by geographic and cultural backgrounds, but also underlying disharmonies. In TCM, liver disharmonies make us crave sour food, while heart disharmonies cause cravings for bitter food. Spleen disharmonies make sweet food appealing; lung disharmonies make us want spicy food; and kidney disharmonies make us feel like having salty food.

If an abnormal taste persists for a long period, consult a health practitioner in order to treat any underlying health condition.

Rose Tse and Jenny Eagleton are with Integrated Chinese Medicine Holdings (icm.com.hk). Before taking any medicine, consult your medical or TCM practitioner