

## Food As Medicine

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Herbs were originally understood as special foods in the same sense that foods can be used in a medicinal way. Each herb has a unique biochemical makeup, giving it specific qualities, flavors, textures and colors with therapeutic value. Foods can also be used in a more intentional way to concentrate their unique properties.

Long before anyone ever heard of the vitamin, people relied on common weeds to help maintain health and well being these plants were steamed, sautéed or added to soup to provide essential nutrients regulate detoxification and elimination, and stimulate digestive fire and circulation.



The medicinal value of herbs and foods can be seen by their heating and cooling energies and their flavors, herbs with the most neutral energy are the seeds, such as whole grains and beans, which generally contain a full range of balanced Yin (cooling) (lowering metabolism) and Yang (warming) (raising metabolism) effects. Meat, sugar and spices tend to have a Yang/warming effect while vegetables, fruits and juices have a Yin/cooling effect.

When herbs and foods are used therapeutically but seem to have not effect it may be due to a lack of understanding of their specific actions or their Yin/Yang characteristics. Another reason that an herb may be ineffective is because its action is being neutralized by foods with opposing energies or qualities. For example, if an individual is trying to raise the metabolism with warm-natured herbs, such as Ginseng, but doesn't eliminate fruit juices or raw salads from the diet, which tend to cool or lower metabolism, s/he will be antidoting the effect of the Ginseng.

Meat is the most Yang food, and while it is more efficiently assimilated or absorbed into the system, than vegetable foods, it is more difficult for the stomach and intestines to digest, or break down. Thus, when we eat too much meat, there is a danger of assimilating toxins such as the antibiotic drugs and hormones used in the meat industry, as well as excess uric acid and other poisons. Meat and dairy products however are highly nutritional when eaten in small amounts with vegetables to help eliminate the meat toxins. Two or four ounces of meat per day cooked with Ginger (to neutralize toxins) is a safe and nutritious amount of meat to consume.

All foods have their own physiological function on the body, and it is through the knowledge of these functions of these foods, that one is able to use food as medicine. Other times, herbs are used in the preparation of food to enhance the immune system and fight off colds. One of the most therapeutic ways to take food as medicine and at the same time strengthen the entire body is to eat congee. It is most effective during convalescence from sickness for those with digestive problems and for treating acute

diseases and symptoms. Traditionally, the Chinese family eats congee on a weekly basis with herbs such as Ginseng, Dang Gui, Codonopsis Red Date, Ginger and /or Astragalus. These tonic herbs are actually more effective and delicious prepared in this food-like manner than when taken alone or in a formula. Tonic herbs such as Ginseng, Dang Gui, Astragalus, Lycii Berries and Longan /berries can be added to soups to create a whole body strengthener. Herbs and foods taken this way best treat deficiency diseases. The Chinese eat these herb soups at least once a week to strengthen the immune system and prevent disease.

Regardless of your eating habits, knowledge of the food's properties can help you begin using food as medicine. I drink green tea up to 4 cups a day. It is not unusual for me to add different herbs into the tea to help fight off an oncoming cold or upset stomach. This way I use herbs in my tea, based on how I feel at that time. It is delicious and beneficial.

This is one way to begin your journey on the road to better health.