

COOLING FOODS

BY BEN XIE

Summer may bring to mind images of outdoor fun, but there is also danger that comes with the sweltering hot temperatures. When the thermoregulatory system of the human body is overwhelmed by the stress caused from heat, a heat stroke can occur. Experts already agree that heat directly damages the cells of the body during this process, but recent studies have shown that heat also causes the body to go into an inflammatory state, which precludes a heat stroke, a potentially life-threatening event.

In Western medicine and nutrition, recommendations for protecting yourself against the summer heat include drinking an adequate amount of water (2 liters per day), consuming generous amounts of vegetables and fruits (at least 5 servings every day), and staying away from foods that contain large quantities of pro-inflammatory molecules (e.g. deep-fried foods and trans fats). Water, making up approximately 60% of our body mass, is vital for normal functioning of the body. Drinking cool water not only efficiently brings down the body's core temperature, but also replenishes the water that is lost in the form of sweat. Vegetables and fruits are recommended due to their high water content (80% to 90%+ for some) and anti-inflammatory power from antioxidants.

Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) suggests similar ideas about cooling your body through food. In TCM, the human body is viewed as part of the universe. Changes within the surrounding environment would naturally lead to changes inside the body. There are two states within the universe and your body: yin and yang. Yin represents coldness, darkness, earth and moving downwards; while yang represents hotness, brightness, sky and moving upwards. TCM considers a person is healthy when inner yin and yang are balanced.

During summer, the strong yang force from the environment increases the yang inside the body. As a result, the introduction of yin is necessary to restore balance. You can achieve this balance through certain foods. In TCM, every food has one of the following five characteristics:

hot, warm, neutral, cool, and cold. In contrast, hot and warm foods would add yang. Here are some simple criteria you can use to identify yin (cooling) foods:

- Green foods such as celery, cucumber, and various green leafy vegetables. Green foods are normally harvested from small plants; being close to the ground means they absorb yin from the earth (a major source of yin).
- Foods with bitter flavors such as bitter melon, grape fruit, and brussel sprouts. Bitterness normally serves as a warning signal for toxic substances, but bitter edible foods carry a wide range of health benefits, one of which is their cooling effect. In Western nutrition, which believes one can cool the body through decreasing inflammation, it was found that catechin, the chemical compound contributing to the unique taste of many bitter foods, is a strong natural antioxidant.
- Foods from plants growing in water or under shade such as seaweed, lotus root, and mushrooms. Their proximity to water and shade, sources of yin, makes them yin as well.
- Summer's seasonal produce such as watermelon, tomato, and cucumber.

One's cooking method also has an impact on the yin and yang of foods. Cooking using dry heat, e.g. frying and grilling, adds yang to the food, while cooking using moist heat, e.g. boiling and steaming, adds yin to the food.

Following the suggestions of these two perspectives - Western medicine and TCM may just be the perfect recipe for coping with Shanghai's hot and humid summers. 🍴

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