

An Ounce of Prevention, the TCM Way

BY GREG A. LIVINGSTON, PHD

It's a rather bold statement, but I believe health is our most valuable possession. As such, we should learn to care for it. If you agree, then you may be interested to learn about Chinese Medicine/TCM health cultivation (中医养生, zhong yi yang sheng), the branch of TCM that instructs on diet, exercise, and other lifestyle practices to improve health/ well-being and extend longevity. Following are some key concepts that can help you and your family stay well.

DIET

Foods are relatively mild substances, but because the cumulative effect they have on our bodies is massive, it behooves us to learn basic dietetic principles:

- **Eat meals at regular times**
The body likes regularity, and following this principle allows digestion to operate most efficiently (efficient bodily function is a key to health and longevity).
- **Do not overeat**
The general rule is eat until 70% full, which means stop eating at the point where you feel like you could still eat a bit more, well before feeling really full. Furthermore, breakfast should be hearty, lunch moderate, and dinner light (and no large meals before sleep).
- **Eat lots of vegetables**
Eat a wide variety and large amount (five parts vegetable to one part meat) of fresh seasonal vegetables. TCM generally recommends cooked vegetables, as they are easier to digest, but keep in mind that vegetables in China are usually cooked quickly and lightly so as to preserve nutritional content.



- **Minimize extremely rich foods and processed foods**
Rich foods are difficult to digest and processed foods often contain harmful ingredients such as preservatives and hydrogenated oils.

- **Sometimes indulge in "junk" foods if it makes you happy**

While this is not exactly part of TCM dietetics, I'd like to add my own two cents by saying we should, within reason, indulge. If we become scared of food and can't enjoy things that simply taste good because they aren't "good for us," then diet gets in the way of a joyous life, and this can also make us unhealthy.

EXERCISE

Humans are meant to be active, and it's no secret that sedentary lifestyle is implicated in many diseases and that regular exercise has many benefits. TCM likes to differentiate a bit further by looking at age, constitution, and overall health to help determine the most appropriate exercise for an individual.

Generally, younger and more robust people are suited for more vigorous exercise, and older or weaker individuals for more moderate exercise. TCM also has a preference for exercises that have been carefully developed to promote optimal physiological function. Tai-ji and other martial arts, Yoga, and Pilates are good examples of these, but the benefits of a stroll on the beach or a hike in the mountains are also cherished.

SLEEP

The equivalent of the old adage "early to bed, early to rise" can be found in nearly all languages, so it's not only the Chinese that knew the importance of sleeping early. Modern research also supports this idea with studies

showing increased incidence of cardiovascular disease, cancer, depression and other disorders in people who work night shifts. The human body operates on a light-sensitive circadian rhythm in which different physiological processes happen at different times of the day and night. Important rejuvenating processes occur at night, but only optimally when sleeping. If we are awake during these dark hours we miss out on the benefits. TCM suggests an adult bedtime of 9-10pm, which is a challenge for those who consider themselves "night-owls." A word of warning: the "night-owl" phenomenon is a sign of pathology in Chinese medicine that warrants treatment, and is best not to ignore.

There's more, but alas we're out of space. Shanghai TCM physician, life cultivation expert and centenarian, Gan Zhu-Wang, sums it up nicely in eight Chinese characters: 童心、蚁食、猴行、龟欲: "Heart like a child, Eat like an ant, Active like a monkey, Desire like a turtle." If health and longevity are your most valuable possession, it's worth pondering his words.

Dr. Livingston is a licensed Chinese Medicine physician (China, USA) with over 15 years experience specializing in internal medicine, and is one of the few Westerners to have completed a Chinese Medicine Ph.D. in China entirely in Chinese. Contact him at Body and Soul Medical Clinics: www.tcm-shanghai.com

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