WINTER FOODS ACCORDING TO TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE

“The wise nourish life by flowing with the four seasons and adapting to cold or heat, by harmonizing joy and anger in a tranquil dwelling, by balancing yin and yang, and what is hard and soft. So it is that dissolve evil cannot reach the man of wisdom, and he will be witness to a long life.” - Huangdi Neijing Suwen

The ancient Chinese believed that human beings should live in harmony with the natural cycles of their environment. The cold and darkness of winter urges us to slow down. This is the time of year to reflect on our health, replenish our energy, and conserve our strength.

Winter is Yin in nature; it is inactive, cold, and damp. Remain introspective, restful, and consolidate your Qi through the season and prepare for the outburst of new life and energy in the spring.

Winter is ruled by the water element, it is the most yin time of year, associated with the kidneys, bladder, adrenal glands, ears and hair. Its taste is salty and its emotion is fear.

According to the philosophy of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), the Kidneys are considered the source of all energy (Qi) within the body.

They store all of the reserve Qi in the body so that it can be used in times of stress and change, or to heal, prevent illness, and age gracefully. They are the balancer of heating and cooling in the body. The image of the Kidney is one of a pot on an open flame. The water represents the yin aspect and the fire represents the yang fire that steams the water up and through the body from the base energy of the Kidneys that powers the bodily functions.

During the winter months it is important to nurture and nourish our kidney Qi. It is the time where this energy can be most easily depleted. Our bodies are instinctively expressing the fundamental principles of winter — rest, reflection, conservation, and storage. It is up to us to respect that expression and to not try to pull that energy up and out which will exhaust it.

Winter is a time when many people tend to reduce their activity. If that’s true for you, it’s wise to reduce the amount of food you eat, too, to avoid gaining weight unnecessarily. Avoid raw foods during the winter as much as possible, as these tend to cool the digestion, making it less efficient and creating dampness in the body. During winter you should emphasize warming foods types:

- Soups and stews-especially with rich stocks and bone broths
- Root vegetables, squashes, winter greens, mushrooms
- Apples, pears, citrus fruit
- Beans
- Miso and seaweed
- Garlic and ginger and cinnamon, nutmeg, cardamon
- Nuts especially walnuts

TCM believes our diet should be adapted to focus on enriching yin and subduing yang, which mean we should consume appropriate fats and high protein foods. Eating warm hearty soups, whole grains, and roasted nuts help to warm the body’s core and to keep us nourished. Eating whole, natural, home grown or local, chemical-free foods are the most nutritious. Embrace the foods that are grown the season you are living in. Sleep early, rest well, stay warm, and expend a minimum quantity of energy.
Specific foods to warm and nourish the Kidneys are:
Black beans, kidney beans, aduki beans and chickpea, bone broths, beef, goose, duck, eggs, rabbit, lamb, chicken, walnuts, chestnuts, black sesame seeds, lamb, chicken, walnuts, chestnuts, micro-algae (such as chlorella, spirulina) and dark leafy greens. Glutinous rice, dates, longan, black fungus, bamboo shoots, and leek are all common in Chinese cooking in winter. Small amounts of milk, butter and ghee can also be added to help protect the Kidney yin. A small amount of unrefined sea salt added to home-cooked foods is also helpful since the taste associated with the Kidney organ is “salty.” Be mindful not to over salt, though (as usually is the case in Western cuisine) - as always, we encourage moderation! It is a balance we should strive for not an overload. Imagine the seesaw when it is perfectly poised in the middle—it maintains a slight give and take movement but once you go too far in one direction that side plunges to the ground while the other flies up. More is an American dream but it doesn’t work well in our bodies.

Our base or Kidney energy determines our ability to grow and develop, physically and mentally. It controls the bones, spine [especially the lower back], legs, ears [hearing], head hair, spinal cord and brain. It also is directly connected with the reproductive system and fertility. A deficiency of this energy can mean a fetus may not be able to grow and develop correctly. I always encourage my mothers-to-be to take tonics for their Kidney energy in order that their child has the best possible start to life and so that the mother will not be left depleted after the birth.

Some very strong Kidney tonics are:
Micro-algae (such as chlorella, spirulina). Chlorella is also a great heavy metal detoxifier.
Small amounts of meat, nuts, milk, & ghee (clarified butter), especially bone marrow soup
Royal jelly and bee pollen
Chinese herbs are the strongest, which in general requires a diagnosis and custom formula. However, one can also cook with herbs such as the bone soup I made today. The ingredients are listed under the chicken soup recipe on this website.

As for cooking methods, it is best to bake, roast, stew, and slow-cook foods in the Winter. Warming spices such as cinnamon, ginger, and cardamom are wonderful additions to your recipes. In TCM, we don’t recommend very hot spicy food in Winter because these foods create sweating, which is actually a cooling process. If your body does not sweat to cool off it will leave far too much heat at once in your system. However, a small pinch of hot spice helps increase circulation, which is beneficial. So, add a small amount of pepper and other flavorful spices for taste, but avoid overdoing it.

Of course, continue drinking water. Even though we may not be sweating as much, our bodies still need water in this season - our increased exposure to the drying nature of interior heating systems can dry skin, lips and crack the tips of fingers. Don’t blindly drink water, listen to your body. Drink water between meals instead of with meals as it allows the digestion to focus on the meal at hand without large quantities of water to process at the same time. If you want fluids with your meal sip them rather than drink a whole glass and make sure they are not cold, icy drinks which are certain to bog down the digestion. We recommend that you drink room temperature or warm water (or herbal tea). Simples such as Ginger root tea or cinnamon stick tea are great or you can put them together with other herbs as in Chai tea. It is a good time to add a good quality skin lotion to your regimen. Look at the ingredients and make sure you know what each ingredient is. Your skin is a sponge and will absorb anything you put on it. It should be considered as carefully as your food.

Staying Healthy This Winter
Seasonal changes affect the body’s environment. With the wind, rain, and snow comes the colds, flu, aches, and pains.

Here are a few tips to staying healthy this winter:

• **Wash your hands regularly.** Studies have shown that one of the main reasons that we catch colds and flu in the winter season is that we are indoors and in closer proximity to others in cold weather. Protect yourself by washing your hands regularly and try not to touch your face.

• **Get plenty of sleep.** The Nei Ching, an ancient Chinese classic, advised people to go to sleep early and rise late, after the sun’s rays have warmed the atmosphere a bit. This preserves your own yang Qi for the task of warming in the face of cold.

• **Reduce stress.** Find a way to relax and release stress on a daily basis. Such methods may include yoga, meditation, biofeedback, simple relaxation therapy, or whatever method you use to release the stress and pressures of modern life.

According to TCM, stress, frustration, and unresolved anger can work together to throw your immune system off, allowing pathogens to easily affect your body. Things that deplete our base energy are:

• Stress, fear, insecurity, and overwork
• Toxins in our food, water, and environment (e.g. pesticides and heavy metals), as well as intoxication with drugs
• Consumption of too many sweet foods
• Excessive semen loss for men, and women bearing “too many” children (for their constitution), or not rebuilding adequately after each birth.

Follow the path of nature and respect this time of year as and inner exploration and contemplation. A time to deeply nourish our inner selves and enjoy the slower pace.

**Books of interest:**
Henry Lu, “Chinese System of Food Cures Prevention and Remedies”
Elson Haas, MD, “Staying Healthy with the Seasons”
Warren Sheir “Ancient Wisdom, Modern Kitchen”
Goeffrey Wilson “Take this Pebble from my Hand”
Paul Pritchford “Healing with Whole Foods”