



## Diet Therapy Starter Sheet: How to Eat

In Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), our energy comes from the food we eat and the air we breathe, so even if you don't have digestive issues, it's worth being mindful of your diet to make sure your body is making the most of the nutrients you're giving it. Eating may seem self-explanatory, but most people eat in ways that do not align with the body's design, which is why we always start any discussion of diet with *how* to eat instead of *what* to eat. Making these simple changes can have a huge impact on digestion and energy...

### Put your body into the "rest and digest" state

The body has two modes, and nowadays most people spend most of their time in the "fight or flight" state because of overloaded schedules, deadlines, and general stress. Fight or flight involves downplaying digestion (among other things), so ideally we would switch to the opposite "rest and digest" state at meals. To do this, start by carving out at least 10 to 30 minutes to simply sit and eat. Rushing produces stress and multitasking by catching up on emails, watching TV, etc. while eating will require blood to flow away from the digestive system. Transition from fight or flight by taking a few deep breaths and/or giving thanks for your food, and then eat mindfully by focusing on the aroma, flavor, and texture of each bite.

### Chew your food

When we're rushing and distracted, we tend to take big bites and big swallows, forcing our stomachs to work on big chunks of food. The stomach's job is to chemically break down tiny pieces of food into even tinier particles. Because it was not designed to handle these big chunks, food will sit inside of it longer and not digest as well as it should, possibly leading to issues like acid reflux, gas, and bloating. Food should be almost liquid by the time you swallow it, and some experts recommend counting your chews to ensure that it is. We recommend simply being mindful of your food's consistency in your mouth and swallowing only when it feels properly ground up.

### Eat regularly

Our bodies like consistency. Eating regular meals lets your body know that everything is going well. Our cavemen ancestors would sometimes go long periods of time without steady meals because of lack of plants to forage or animals to hunt. Their bodies would change their metabolic rate and store fat in order to make sure they made it to their next meal, and our bodies still do this even though most of us are never near starvation. Eating consistently prevents this shift in metabolism and ensures a steady supply of energy to get you through the day. Unless you practice intermittent fasting, which is the intentional avoidance of food and caloric beverages for uninterrupted stretches of time, aim for at least three meals a day with the last one being at least two to three hours before you go to bed. Digestion takes a lot of energy - think of how sluggish you feel after eating a heavy meal - and eating before bed makes the body focus on digestion rather than the rest and repair that usually happens during sleep. If you feel hungry at night or need to eat because of blood sugar issues, choose a small, light snack to minimize the impact on sleep.



## Diet Therapy Starter Sheet: What to Eat

TCM sees food as herbal medicine, meaning different foods benefit different organ systems and affect the body in different ways. People did not know about nutrients thousands of years ago, but they still understood the importance of variety and moderation on diet. They also didn't face the nutritional challenges we have today, so in addition to following Chinese diet therapy guidelines, also make smart choices by reading ingredient labels to make sure your food is actually food (not chemicals) and buying organic and local options as often as you can.

### Heat your food (and water)

In TCM the main digestive organ likes to be warm, which means cold food will impair its function. If you tend to eat a lot of food straight from the refrigerator, get in the habit of heating or reheating food before eating it. Cold water has the same impact on digestion, and unfortunately in America we tend to add ice to all of our beverages. While some people truly crave cold water, most drink it simply because it is a cultural habit. Try switching to room temperature water for a week and see how you feel. If you prefer it cold, at least opt for room temperature water when you first wake up (to gently wake your digestive system instead of shocking it) and around mealtimes. *Further reading: [BeachsideAcupuncture.com/blog-organ-disharmony](http://BeachsideAcupuncture.com/blog-organ-disharmony)*

### Prepare your vegetables (and nuts)

Have you ever noticed that Chinese restaurants rarely serve salads? In TCM vegetables are hard on the digestive system when they are raw and should therefore be lightly cooked. That being said, overcooking can deplete the nutritional value of a food, so you don't want veggies that are so cooked that they are dark, pale, or wilted. Instead, think of broccoli that's been steamed for a few minutes to the point of being bright green and still crunchy and aim for that. If you're the type of person who is ALWAYS hot, you can get away with consuming more raw vegetables because they can cool excess heat. For everyone else, practice moderation with raw vegetables. As for nuts, their outer layer can be difficult to digest, so soaking them before eating them can be helpful. Search online for the recommended amount of time for each type of nut.

### Eat balanced meals

Meals should contain a small amount of meat, some unprocessed grains, and lots of produce, which aligns with what we now call a plant-based, whole-foods diet. While TCM does not advocate outright vegetarianism, the amount of animal protein we eat nowadays tends to be excessive, and studies in epigenetics - how gene expression is turned on and off by environmental factors - have shown that proteins in meat and milk can contribute to many modern diseases. Make plants the center of your meals with meat as a garnish instead of the other way around, and also limit the other things that we tend to consume in excess, such as caffeine, sugar, alcohol, and grease, all of which cause their own health problems. Of course, if your nutritionist or doctor has told you to follow a particular diet or if you follow another diet because of religious beliefs, ethical concerns, food allergies, or other reasons, then by all means adjust the recommendations given here to fit with your current eating habits. *Further reading: the book [The China Study](#) (or the movie [Forks Over Knives](#))*