



## Yin-Yang Balance and Food Choice

Choosing the right foods for your constitution is the foundation to healing and vitality. As a longtime nutritionist I can report remarkable changes in individuals' health when they get their food selections right. Keep in mind, the right food for someone else may not be the best choice for you.

Nutritional balance from an eastern or Chinese medicine viewpoint is far different from a Western "nutrition" perspective. Modern nutritional science is based on the chemical composition of foods and the biochemical pathways of the body. Western nutritionists like to quantify nutrients into **grams** of protein, fat or carbohydrate, **milligrams** of sodium and other minerals and vitamins, **calories**, and so on. These micro- and macronutrient amounts are given to the public as general recommendations.

Similarly, scientists like to group foods into one-size-fits-all categories. The U.S. government's Food Pyramid, for example, lumps bread, pasta, and all other grains together as "carbohydrates" and suggests 5-8 servings for everyone. In Eastern medicinal systems, foods are classified according to their properties. Bread and pasta are *damp* and *cooling* according to Chinese medicine and thus not recommended for someone overweight, bloated or with sinus congestion. Sprouted grains, rye and wild rice, although also carbohydrates, have different properties than regular bread and pasta, and can actually be helpful for people with these damp signs.

According to Eastern traditions the forces of *yin* and *yang* are *energetic* qualities that shape everything in the universe, including our health. The Chinese symbol for yin is the shady side of a hill whereas the symbol for yang is the sunny side. Thus, yin qualities include coolness, dampness and darkness, in contrast to the yang qualities of warmth, dryness, and light. Winter is yin whereas summer is yang. Nighttime is yin whereas day is yang. Arthritis made worse by cold weather is a yin condition. A red, inflamed rash brought on by heat is a yang condition. A ruddy-faced, irritable man with high blood pressure is relatively yang. An anemic, melancholy, pale woman is relatively yin.

Yin foods tend to be cooling and/or moistening for the body. Yang foods tend to be heating and drying. This has less to do with the actual temperature or moisture of the food and more to do with its *energetics*. Cooked, hot spinach, for example, is cooling and moistening, as is tofu. An iced cocktail or chilled wine, on the other hand, is heating, as is roast beef. Toast, while dry to touch, actually moistens the body. Bitter-tasting foods, including coffee, green tea, broccoli, and bitter greens and herbs help dry dampness in the body. In ancient Eastern cultures, the effects of such food qualities on health have been observed for thousands of years.

By paying attention to your body and understanding the energetics of food and of movement, you can make food and activity choices to heal your body or boost your vitality. Although more complex than can be covered here, the following is an overview of yin and yang patterns of imbalance and food choices that can help restore balance. See if you can identify signs of imbalance in yourself. Your constitution is always changing so be sure you adjust your choices with the seasons and your life situation.

### **Yin Patterns of Imbalance**

#### **Cold Signs**

Tendency to feel chilled  
Dresses warmly/likes heat  
Tends toward pale complexion  
Prefers warm food/drinks  
Rarely thirsty  
Tends to feel depressed  
Quiet, withdrawn  
Urine tends to be clear  
Tendency toward loose stools  
Slow metabolism  
Soft, fleshy muscles  
Often tired/sleeps a lot  
Health worse in cold weather

A *cold* pattern often happens in vegetarians or those who eat primarily raw foods, even more so when they live in a cold place. Cold signs can also set in with age and may be combined with dampness. Regular vigorous aerobic exercise is helpful for healing a cold pattern, especially when there are also signs of dampness. Healing food choices include beef and lamb-based soups and stews, chicken stew, roasted dark poultry, free range eggs, eel, trout and wild salmon. Dishes such as garlicky lamb-vegetable stew and gingered-broccoli beef are particularly warming. Vegetables should be cooked. Good choices include carrots, parsnips, beets and winter squash, sautéed onions and mustard greens. Vegetables can be made more warming with the use of nuts and seeds, butter, cinnamon, garlic, ginger, turmeric or pepper, all warming additions. Warming grains include oatmeal, quinoa and buckwheat. Food is best consumed cooked and warm. Drinks should be warm. Salads, raw fruits, frozen desserts, pasta, white flour and iced beverages should be minimized to reduce signs of a cold pattern.

### **Damp Signs**

Strong dislike of humidity  
Health worsens in dampness  
Tends to retain fluids  
Overweight with soft fat  
Puffy eyes or face  
Feeling of heaviness especially in lower body  
Stuffy nose, postnasal drip  
Mental fogginess  
Abdominal bloating  
Little thirst or hunger  
Urine tends to be cloudy  
Easily short of breath

*Dampness* can be associated with *cold* or *heat* and is exacerbated by damp living conditions as well as certain food choices. Chronic dampness is brought on by eating on the run, excessive worry or from a diet rich in fried foods, breads, pasta, commercial dairy - especially ice cream - and eating too many sweets. An excess of salads and raw fruits weakens digestion and can also lead to dampness. Aerobic exercise is often essential for drying dampness. Helpful foods include lightly cooked greens including broccoli, turnip greens, asparagus, and kale. Fish and grilled or roasted meats and poultry are helpful as well. The best grain choices include rye, jasmine and basmati rice as well as sprouted grains. Radishes, turnips, pumpkin seeds, green tea and other “bitter” foods are particularly helpful at drying dampness. Sweets, dairy and starchy foods contribute to this pattern. Ice cream, lasagna, white bread and milk should be avoided to reduce dampness. Pay attention to the presence of *heat* or *cold signs* to further refine your food choices



## **Yang Patterns of Imbalance**

### **Heat Signs**

Tendency to feel warm  
Uncomfortable in hot weather  
Dresses in short sleeves  
Tends toward ruddy complexion  
High blood pressure  
Often thirsty, craves cold drinks  
Tendency toward impatience, irritability or anger  
Tendency to be talkative  
Urine tends to be dark  
May suffer fever blisters, canker sores  
May suffer headaches, nose bleeds, bleeding gums  
Sleep often restless, disturbing dreams  
May be constipated

A *heat* pattern shows up more often in hot weather or with stress. Overwork, stress, frustration, alcohol, fried foods and poor quality fats and sugar all heat the body. A steady diet of fried chips, French fries, greasy burgers and fast food contribute to heat in the body. Taking too little time off from work and being around frustrating people also give rise to heat. Meditation, walks in nature, swimming and/or yoga are ideal for balancing the agitated nature of a heat imbalance. Ideal foods to cool this pattern are salads, cucumbers, and lightly cooked green leafy vegetables, especially spinach and watercress. Vegetables of all kinds are helpful whereas red meats and greasy foods should be limited. Other cooling foods include melons, pears, bean dishes, mung beans, sprouts, sushi, non-spicy soups and lots of water. Alcohol is extremely heating and best avoided. Mint is a beneficial cooling herb and can be enjoyed often as a tea. Pepper, cinnamon, garlic, ginger, and onions should also be reduced to balance a heat pattern.

### **Dry Signs**

Dry skin, dandruff  
Dry stools, constipation

Dry throat or eyes  
Night sweats  
Menopause  
Thin body type  
Rosy cheeks, especially after exercise  
Cravings for sweets  
Preference for warm liquids in small sips  
Can easily become both hot or cold  
Easily stressed, irritated or frustrated

A *dry* pattern is a deficiency of yin. Although this is our moist, feminine aspect, it is important to balance in both sexes. Our yin element includes hormones, skin oils, saliva, digestive juices and secretions. Fluids are akin to a car's antifreeze; when our fluids are low, we can easily overheat in hot weather, or get overly cold when temperatures drop. We see dryness at menopause, or as we age and skin and hair become dry. Dryness can set in with prolonged stress. Although hot flashes feel like heat, they are a sign of diminishing yin, and thus dryness, which allows the normal heat of the body to go unchecked. Stress also depletes yin, causing dryness.

Remedies include meditation, yoga, walks in nature and gardening. Beneficial fats are critical. Healthful choices include fatty fish, free range eggs, grass fed butter, goat and sheep cheeses, olive and coconut oils, dark poultry meat, pork, nuts, and avocado. Soups and stews rich with grass-fed animal fats are also nourishing for dryness. Other moistening foods include black beans, green beans, Napa cabbage, winter squash, yams, sea vegetables, millet, whole wheat, fermented soy and shellfish.

All constitutional types benefit by choosing foods according to the seasons. Summer foods such as salads, cucumbers, and melons are ideal for hot weather. Conversely meats, root vegetables, hot soups and stews are most nourishing in winter. Pay attention to your body and the seasons and choose the foods that are naturally balancing.