

garlic & health

GARLIC IN TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE

Paul O'Brien

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Garlic is one of the most widely used herbs in three of the world's major traditional health systems: Ayurvedic medicine, traditional Chinese medicine and traditional European medicine.

As a staple of kitchen pharmacies the world over, garlic has been used for centuries. Throughout history, garlic has earned various reputations in all sorts of contexts, with references ranging from cultural to medical.

In traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), the first recorded mention of garlic's medicinal properties is 2000 BCE, when it was believed to possess miraculous properties for curing poisoning. The venerable Yellow Emperor, Huang-ti, now revered as a mythic god-like figure, was the father of Chinese culture and medical knowledge. He laid the foundations for the principals of TCM and wrote the first text on Chinese medicine.

Legend has it that one day Huang-ti was out walking with his companions. They all stopped to enjoy the fruits of nature and ate an aroid plant (related to the philodendron) called yu-yu, which poisoned them. Huang-ti acted quickly, however, and divined the intrinsic medicinal properties of a nearby herb. Upon his suggestion, they all ingested the herb, thereby curing themselves of the poisoning.

The miracle herb, of course, was

none other than garlic. To save the life of a Divine Emperor is no small claim to fame; it also earned garlic a place in the *Chinese Herbal Medicine Materia Medica*.

Garlic has a more practical everyday use, which is to ward off the evil of ill health. It is one of the most widely used herbs in three of the world's major traditional health systems: Ayurvedic medicine, traditional Chinese medicine and traditional European medicine. Healers worldwide associate garlic with treating infection and cleansing the body of pathogens.

TCM: the medicine of metaphor

Traditional Chinese medicine might be accused of being imprecise by Western standards. But in fact, Chinese medicine uses metaphors to explain physiological processes. It predates the Western scientific model and derives from a time when people understood the world via stories and images rather than numbers and statistics. Thus, it might seem that TCM is incompatible with the kinds of direct explanations that Western science prefers.

However, we might also say that Western scientific methods simply

have not caught up; they aren't sophisticated enough to allow complexity and ambiguity, nor is their language yet comprehensive enough to explain the complicated paradigms that are so readily available in TCM.

The Yellow Emperor's medical insights were recorded in a text known as the *Huangdi Neijing*, often translated as *The Inner Canon of Huangdi*. This ancient text is still the foundation for traditional Chinese medical practice.

The names of the body's organs in TCM refer not only to the physical objects themselves, but also to energy systems with associated properties and functions. According to the Yellow Emperor, garlic is "warming in nature and has an affinity toward the stomach and Spleen, Heart and Small Intestine, and the Lungs and Large Intestine."

Garlic and digestion

Practically speaking, what TCM describes as the "warmth" of garlic helps the stomach and the spleen to digest food and fluid, thus eliminating and suppressing harmful micro-organisms, such as excess *Candida*. Western science has yet to figure out the exact biological mechanism by which this

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works, whereas much of Chinese Medicine is based on five thousand years of observation and experience; the tried, tested, and true.

Modern research confirms TCM's assertion that garlic benefits the digestive system – research suggests that ingesting garlic can be extremely effective in treating colon and stomach cancers. It has been used traditionally to relieve cases of food poisoning and other ailments of the digestive tract; to help combat cancer; to reduce high blood cholesterol and high blood pressure; to prevent symptoms of vomiting and coughing up blood.

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In essence, the warmth of garlic increases the temperature of the area in which the invader organisms are lodged, whether that's the stomach, lungs, or elsewhere. This creates an inhospitable environment in which the harmful micro-organisms cannot survive. The additional warmth also encourages the body to break down and dissolve masses of stagnation – which in traditional Chinese medicine would appear as cancer cells. Again, the biomedical function through which this occurs is unknown to Western science.

Stagnation in the body, including what we call cancer, is often caused by coldness in the body. If you warm the body then you melt the stagnation and create movement of energy, which we call Qi. Western medicine attempts to recreate the same thing artificially, using chemo and radiation therapy – radiation is used to induce "heat" into the body. The drugs create heat, which

leads to a loss of moisture in the body, resulting in ulcers in the mouth, hair loss, etc. Ironically, such methods engender imbalance in an attempt to correct imbalances.

Garlic and the immune system

Finally, garlic has a natural affinity with another all important organ, the lungs. Now, this may seem self-evident, given what it does to one's breath (i.e. the offensive onslaught to the olfactory senses of a neighbour); however, the offensive odour also comes from the warmth of the garlic. As the garlic is digested in the stomach, the oils are vaporised and the resulting vapours rise, diffusing into the lungs, and dispersing into our immune system.

In Chinese medicine, the lungs are seen as responsible for the *Wei-Qi* or immune system. This is because we breathe in sickness (i.e. colds and flus). As the vapour diffuses and rises into the lungs, it stimulates and strengthens their function, thereby strengthening the immune system. At the same time, this causes the excretion of pathogenic evils, such as bacteria, common cold, or viruses such as influenza.

Many people reach for the orange juice when they feel a cold coming on, because we know that vitamin C can boost our immune system. Vitamin C plays other roles, such as:

- helping convert cholesterol to bile acids used in digestion
- helping prevent many chronic diseases such as gallbladder disease
- helping the body absorb iron
- destroying free radicals, which are the molecules that are most commonly associated with cell damage and signs of aging
- rebuilding cells and damaged tissues; for example it helps synthesise collagen, a vital component of blood, tendons, ligaments, and bones

MODERN RESEARCH CONFIRMS TCM'S ASSERTION THAT **GARLIC** BENEFITS THE DIGESTIVE SYSTEM.

- helping to synthesize neurotransmitters (aka the things that carry out our brain's commands)
- helping us utilize stored body fat for energy

Three cloves of garlic contain 2.8 mg of vitamin C, or about 5% of our daily requirement.

Garlic and cardiovascular health

Although the claim that garlic is responsible for amazing curative results dates back thousands of years, it has recently been validated scientifically through studies which have found that not only does garlic possess antibacterial qualities, it also lowers blood cholesterol and protects the heart. This healthy benefit is likely caused by the interaction of chemicals found in garlic and the red blood cells.

For example, according to a 2007 study conducted by the University of Alabama in Birmingham, garlic's sulfur compounds (the chemicals responsible for the funky smell) cause red blood cells to release hydrogen sulphide (H₂S) which results in the relaxation of blood vessels. In fact, researchers were able to reduce arterial tension by up to 72%

in rat blood vessels, simply by bathing the arteries in a solution of garlic from bulbs purchased at local supermarkets. These findings suggest that the heat from garlic also increases circulation in the blood and can therefore lower blood pressure.

Take two cloves and call me in the morning

In order to ensure a significant antibiotic effect, take three to six cloves daily. This is a traditional medicinal dosage.

One must take heed, however, that if you are already too hot, and suffer from conditions that TCM would understand as heat related – explosive diarrhea, skin rashes, mouth ulcers, etc. – the excess heat produced by garlic may make your symptoms worse.

There are many ways one can prepare garlic. You can:

- add garlic to recipes
- ingest it by itself, either cooked or raw
- boil it in hot water to make a tea – garlic tea can strengthen the immune system and make you incredibly resistant to colds and flus (and possibly clear you a table or two in your local cafe)

Other traditions concerning the use of garlic are less conceivable, and downright weird for us to consider today. A funny use I often mention to my patients is a traditional 7th-century herbal recipe for relieving diarrhea. The remedy is simple: tape mashed garlic on both sides of one's navel and voilà, problem solved.

You might also have fun making a garlic wine to have at the ready for the cold season. This is a common antidote prepared in Chinese homes. Soak three peeled garlic bulbs in 6 ounces (180 mL) of rice wine for at least one month. If someone then catches a cold, this person should be prescribed one tablespoonful (15 mL) of the wine before retiring to bed for the night.

Okay, I'll be honest: it doesn't taste great, but it is very effective. You can make a garlic wine more palatable by dissolving sugar in boiling water and mixing it in with the wine immediately before taking the daily dose.

Remember a clove a day keeps vampires, snakes, beasts, bacteria, viruses – and possibly bed partners – away!