

FOODS THAT HEAL

TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE

RICE: THE FIRST TREATMENT

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When I was a young boy, I loved watching sumo wrestling. I was convinced that the big wrestlers' bellies were filled with rice (no offense intended to any sumo). I have no idea why I thought this, but it stuck with me from those early formative years: **I have always associated rice with strength.**



True, that's an odd association, but as I delved into the complex mysteries of traditional Chinese medicine, I learned that my first impression wasn't far off the mark. Sumo wrestlers *do* eat a lot of rice, and rice is seen as a traditional bastion of strength and good health.

Rice is perhaps one of the most common, simple, and under-appreciated foods available. Cheap, tasty, and incredibly versatile, rice is also the primary treatment prescribed to any patient in traditional Chinese medicine, regardless of illness. Written 3,000 years ago, the *Yellow Emperor's Classic* is the oldest medical text in the world, and the fundamental Chinese Medical guide. It describes a ten day rice gruel fast as the first remedy for disease.

This classic text holds that food therapy is key to treating any disease. Traditionally, the sages and physicians first treated illness through diet, creating what they viewed as a balanced state in their patients' bodies by prescribing a rice-only regime for ten days. Importantly, this was not the low-fibre, nutrient-poor white rice that we now associate with classic East Asian cuisine. Rather, the rice was an indigenous, whole-grain brown rice made into gruel and was the only food consumed during that ten-day period. If a person is emotionally balanced, said the text, this rice-only diet would suffice to cure them.

In Eastern medicine, cereals and grains have always had a special importance in the diet, because water and grains were traditionally seen as the root of life. Death was seen as the depletion of these energy-giving substances. Rice was a vital and harmony-promoting food, however; traditional healers might add specific herbs to the rice to treat more

stubborn conditions. If that failed to resolve the condition, the ancient Chinese physicians brought out their most powerful tool: acupuncture. Yet the cornerstone of good health and healing was simply rice.

Ancient Chinese medics revised and refined the power of rice by combining the simple food with a powerful mould. This mould, called *Monascus purpureus* (*hongqu*), is fermented with rice to produce a red-purple substance called red yeast rice, or *Xue Zhi Kang*. This combination of rice and mould has been used in Chinese medicine for centuries; for instance, to promote blood circulation and stimulate digestion, properties that were first noted in the traditional Chinese pharmacopoeia, *Ben Cao Gang Mu-Dan Shi Bu Yi*, during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). Often prescribed for treating abdominal pain due to stagnant blood and dysentery, as well as external and internal trauma, red yeast rice has also been used in the treatment of high cholesterol and in bone weakening diseases such as osteoporosis.

Recently, modern scientists have made a number of discoveries that support this traditional practice and have found that red yeast rice contains natural statins, a group of drugs that are commonly used to reduce cholesterol in the blood. Available under many different pharmaceutical names, statins work by blocking the action of a liver enzyme needed to make cholesterol. Red yeast rice mimics this cholesterol-blocking effect naturally with substances known as monacolins. (Plant sterols in the red yeast rice also may have related effects.)

For instance, one clinical study found that lifestyle changes, such as improved diet and regular exercise, combined with ingestion of red yeast

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rice and fish oil reduced "bad cholesterol" (low-density lipoprotein C) in proportions similar to standard therapy with simvastatin, a commonly used statin drug. Another large-scale study in China followed nearly 5,000 participants who had already had one heart attack. Patients were randomly assigned to either placebo or red yeast rice daily for an average of 4.5 years. The red yeast rice treatment:

- decreased death from cardiovascular and other causes by one-third;
- decreased the need for coronary revascularization by one-third;
- lowered total and low-density lipoprotein cholesterol and triglycerides; and,
- raised high-density lipoprotein cholesterol levels.

Thus, the researchers concluded that long-term therapy with red yeast rice "significantly decreased the recurrence of coronary events and the occurrence of new cardiovascular events and deaths, improved lipoprotein regulation, and was safe and well tolerated."

Red yeast rice appears to have few of the potentially serious side effects of pharmaceutical statins. It's also been shown to promote bone growth and correct neurodegeneration from zinc deficiency in animal subjects.

The average consumption of natu-

rally occurring red yeast rice in Asia varies widely by region and cultural group, from 14-55 grams per day. Traditional texts suggest consuming between 6,000-9,000 mg per day, although that's with the traditional manufacture of the rice. You can now buy red yeast rice extract as a powder. The typical dose is approximately 600-1,200 mg of the concentrated powder taken with food, though you can consume up to 4,800 mg.

However, it's important to remember that formulations aren't standardized, so buyer beware. If you're in the United States, you might not be able to buy a complete formulation. In 1999, the United States Food and Drug Administration sought to ban red yeast rice, arguing that it contained naturally occurring statins, and thus was a medication in competition with commercial statin drugs. Any red yeast rice sold in the US must now be made so that it's lovastatin-free.

Rice has been used for centuries in China as a flavour enhancer, a food preservative, and surprisingly, as a base for a Taiwanese alcoholic rice-wine beverage. My patients are always eager and surprised to learn there is a long history of medicinal alcohol in Chinese medicine (yep, not only can

drinking make you feel better, but it can be useful in treating a number of diseases). Medicinal alcohol has been used both internally and externally to improve circulation of the blood and Qi (vital energy). Wine is primarily used as a solvent in TCM, breaking down herbs and allowing them to be easily absorbed into the blood. Volatile oils in herbs break down in wine better than in water and can be stored easily for longer periods of time.

One of the most important of these traditional alcoholic medicines is made from sticky rice and is called yellow rice wine. Traditional texts

suggest drinking a little of this rice wine every day in order to stimulate the movement of blood, dispel cold, nourish the tendons and muscles, and reinforce the effects of any herbs being prescribed and to treat diseases of the heart and blood vessels.

A simple grain of rice – the foundation of all treatments, the base of Chinese elixirs of health and a tonic for the heart, blood, and general body – is definitely something to keep in mind when you're enjoying the fantastic recipes in this issue. (Or considering sumo wrestling.)

Sources

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