



FOODS THAT HEAL

TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE

CHOCOLATE: THE BEST TASTING MEDICINE IN THE WORLD

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All right, full disclosure. Chocolate is my favourite food. I once claimed that food fell into two categories:

- 1. Chocolate.**
- 2. Everything else.**

And I refused to eat from the latter.

The happiest day of my food-related life was Christmas Day, 2006. My Christmas present to myself was a full restored Queen Anne wingtip red leather armchair. I sat in the chair, adorned in my paisley smoking jacket, sipping a hot chocolate and holding a Twirl Chocolate bar in the other. I don't think I've ever been more content.

The most delicious part though, is that when I'm hogging all the chocolate in the house and everyone is getting at me for it I justify myself with the ultimate excuse: "I'm eating all of this for medicinal purposes only!"

Yeah, right.

Okay, that's mostly a lie, but it's true that chocolate has incredible medical qualities.

Our defense of overindulgence begins with the Mesoamericans, who were the first to utilize chocolate. Early peoples such as the Mayans prepared cacao and mixed it with several herbs; this became a spiritual nectar enjoyed by priests and shamans during religious rites. The Mayans passed knowledge of this sacred drink to the Aztecs, who revered it for its wondrous properties. In fact, the Aztec Emperor Montezuma was reported to have said that cocoa was, "The divine drink, which builds up resistance and fights fatigue. A cup of this precious drink permits a man to walk for a whole day without food". (For more on Mesoamerican use of cacao, see "Bitter Drink", elsewhere in this issue. —Ed.)

The health benefits of dark chocolate have recently been confirmed by modern scientists. The delicious delicacy has even earned a place on the Healing Food Pyramid compiled by Monica Myklebust, MD, and Jenna Wunder, MPH, RD, from the University of Michigan's Integrative Medicine Clinical Services.

But there is a catch. These health benefits are primarily associated with cacao, the primary ingredient in chocolate, not the commercially available bars that are loaded with sugar and unhealthy oils. Before we give up on chocolate however, we can still enjoy dark chocolate that is at least 70% cacao/cocoa, and we'll examine what benefits this confers from a TCM perspective.

As we've seen in previous articles, in traditional Chinese medicine, food plays an integral role in our health, with each food connected to different organs and flavours. Looking at cacao itself from a Chinese medicine perspective it has properties connected with the heart, spleen and kidneys. So how does chocolate affect our health?

The answer lies in its flavour. The sweetness of chocolate is associated with the spleen. Thus it calms our thoughts, makes us happy and increases our energy. Cacao itself is also warming. Its heat stirs the heart, making our blood quicken while stirring the "lifegate fire" in TCM. This is a rather poetic way of saying it strengthens kidney Yang, or our sexual energy.

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Chocolate can actually be the food of love. It increases your physical energy, stirs passion and moves Qi and blood. It provides a quick boost of Yang, physical active energy. This helps to expel dampness and stagnation, and thus benefits the Liver too. This is why angry, stressed people enjoy chocolate – it temporarily gets things moving.

However, as the old saying goes, you can have too much of a good thing. Chocolate is very powerful. A little goes a long way, and too much can easily overwhelm the body, particularly the spleen and kidneys. Consume chocolate in excess and you can easily become damp (heavy, lethargic, sleep, overweight, depressed) and exhaust kidney Yang (meaning you can become unmotivated, apathetic, impotent, and sore and achy).

So what's the best way to take this tasty tonifier? High quality, high cacao/cocoa products have the most benefits while minimizing the unhealthy substances, such as the oils and sugar used in milk chocolate. Look for bars that are at least 70% cocoa. A medicinally beneficial portion would be half to one ounce a day. Any more than that and it could overwhelm the spleen and lead to dampness. It's just enough to savour and enjoy while it benefits your health, but not enough to dampen your spirits, or your wellbeing. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm off to enjoy a delicious, decadent, healing hot cocoa.