

HOW FOODS HEAL

# BASIL IN TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE

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Concern over health is not new. However, we now turn to drugs and other pharmaceutical solutions to cure our illnesses, forgetting the proven remedies of the past that have kept many people strong, vital and healthy throughout history.

In this new column, How Foods Heal, I'm going to share with you the facts and legends behind simple everyday foods and herbs that people have used traditionally to improve their health, recover from illness, boost their immune systems, and rejuvenate their lives. In this first column it seems only fitting we begin with the "King of the Herbs": basil.

As Jenny Russell explores in her article on the history of basil (see elsewhere in this issue), the word basil itself is derived from the Greek

βασιλεύς (basileus), which means "king". Early Christian legend has it that basil grew above the spot where St. Constantine and Helen discovered the Holy Cross. Basil is of course a staple of Italian cuisine and the culinary herb features prominently in Southern Asian cuisine, most notably in those of Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, not to mention the long history established with its use in China and India, where it has been cultivated for over 5,000 years.

Although basil appears in cuisines worldwide, its use as medicine is less well known to North Americans and Europeans. But East and South Asians have long used basil to heal. Basil has been, and continues to be, widely used in systems of traditional medicine, including Ayurveda and traditional

Chinese medicine (TCM). (See Kyra de Vreeze's article, "Holy... Tulsil", elsewhere in this issue, for more on Ayurveda.)

As a trained TCM practitioner, I'll explore how TCM approaches healing and the use of food to treat and prevent disease, as well as to maintain good health.

### **Traditional Chinese medicine: A brief introduction**

From a traditional Chinese medical point of view, foods play a crucial role in how our bodies work and how our health is managed.

Let me explain. Imagine that you have a Ferrari (lucky you!). If you fill its gas tank with high performance gasoline, it will perform at its best. But imagine that instead of supplying it with fancy petrol, you choose, for some mysterious reason, to fill its gas tank with sugar and water. The gas tank may be full, but what fills it doesn't help much. How far do you think you would get on a full tank of sugar and water? Not far, right?

Your body works much like the engine of a high-performance sports car. (Feel free to begin referring to yourself as a "high-performance engine".) Yet instead of supplying the body with quality fuel in the form of food to help their "engines" run smoothly, many people actually fill up on little more than sugar and water. Their tanks may feel full, but what's in there isn't of any use.

Thus, TCM looks at what we're putting in our "gas tanks", and what relationship this has to our health.

Western medicine often assumes that we get ill because of some pathogen, such as a micro-organism, that affects a single organ or system in isolation. (Consider, for instance, the prevalence of "ear, nose, and throat" specialists.) The traditional Chinese

medical approach looks more at the body as a set of systems and how these systems interact with the world around them.

Simply put, in the traditional Chinese medical approach, there are only really three ways of getting ill.

1. You're born with it. This is termed a kidney Yin/Yang deficiency.
2. Your environment. For instance, a chronically cold environment will lead to cold invading the body, resulting in a stiffening of the joints and slowing of the body, which might make you feel achey. Of course, your emotional state is often a reaction to your environment. For example, you might feel anxious or depressed in a stressful environment – and we all know what havoc stress can play with our physical systems.
3. You eat it – and by this I don't mean simply food poisoning, but the cumulative damage even seemingly healthy food can have on the body and how it undermines the effectiveness of the whole system.

### **The role of food**

Number three – food – is the big one.

If you can get your diet to support your body's energy systems, then genetic factors can be bolstered and you can boost your immunity to your environment. What you eat helps you manage both your own natural physiological risk as well as the stressors around you.

In Chinese medicine, the foods and herbs you eat determine not only how you feel physically but also emotionally. Proper food choices and simple things like enjoying basil can dramatically enhance your digestive function and immune system – and maybe even prevent chronic diseases such as cancer. That's not even touching on

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the general benefits like more energy, better sleep, better mood... and the list just keeps on going.

## **Basil's use in TCM**

In TCM, each food has a flavour and “temperature” that relates to its function and role in the body system. For instance, if one is suffering from a “hot” condition, such as irritable bowel, diarrhea, kidney complaints, infections, or fever then the proper treatment is to “cool” the body. One excellent herb that has this property is basil.

You can try most of these traditional remedies at home. For example, basil is commonly used (often boiled in a tea) to treat digestive disorders and to relieve coughs and colds.

Basil can soothe itchy, hot and irritated eyes – a common occurrence from an overly “hot” diet or staring too long at a computer screen. Take basil leaves and pulp them in a small amount of distilled water to make ear- and eye-drops. When using a small amount of basil leaves I'd suggest no more than 1/4 cup (75 mL). Add only enough water to form the pulp – just a few drops to clump the ground pulped basil leaves together (perhaps only a millilitre or less).

Basil can even relieve insect bites. According to TCM, the infection is hot

in nature. The irritation caused by the insect bite leaves the skin inflamed, swollen, hot to touch and sore, often with raised red bumps. A poultice of basil not only cools the skin temperature and the irritation, but also acts as an antiseptic.

This use of basil isn't just hearsay and folklore. These 5,000 year old treatments have been recently supported by Western scientific evidence. The health benefits conferred by the essential oils found in basil have been exhaustively studied as of late with surprising results. Scientific studies have established that compounds in basil oil have potent antioxidant, anti-cancer, anti-viral, and anti-microbial properties. (For more on this, please see “From Lab to Lunch: Basil”, elsewhere in this issue.)

Finally, basil may even be the fountain of youth! According to research presented at the British Pharmaceutical Conference (BPC) in Manchester 2008, basil can protect against the harmful effects of aging. In a formal study, the first of its kind, pharmacy researchers found that basil extract was effective at actively searching for and eliminating harmful molecules and protecting against damage caused by some free radicals in key organs such as the heart, liver and brain.

In describing how the herb acts at the cellular level to inhibit aging processes, lead researcher Dr Vaibhav Shinde from Poona College of Pharmacy, Maharashtra, India, confirmed that this research validates the traditional use of herb as a youth-promoting substance in the Ayurvedic system of medicine. Thus, traditional knowledge is now being supported by modern research.

Next time you're enjoying pesto you can be happy knowing that not only does it taste great, it'll also help you ward off colds and flus, settle your stomach and make you live longer. Not bad for a little garden herb!

## **Sources**

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