

Staying healthy in the Winter

Winter is now well and truly here! As the cold and humidity descend upon us, some of us may experience more back pain, knee pain, sciatica, fatigue, anxiety, or urinary problems amongst others. The cold seeps in right down to your bones.

In the yin yang theory at the base of all Chinese medicine, winter is yin at its peak, quiet, dark, cold, the energy is returning to the inside. We may feel this need too, to have a break, breathe and find ourselves again. At the close of the (Chinese) year, a lot of us have taken big decisions and implemented profound changes. This year was the year of the snake, of shedding one's skin; we have hopefully started to realise things must change. In Chinese medicine, autumn is also the season of letting go. Just as the trees shed their leaves, we reevaluate our life, it's the occasion to let go of what isn't needed anymore, both on a physical and emotional level. Whilst full of potential, this shedding processes can sometimes be very painful and exhausting, but the reward is clarity. Before we engage with the year of the Horse (hang on for the ride!), it is important to let these changes embed in us, mature, and recharge our batteries, so that we don't get thrown off the horse and keep in charge of it.



Chinese Medicine of course bring us very practical solutions to these physical and emotional problems, but one of its great strength is also the philosophical frame which underpins it.

Live in sync with the seasons:

One of the foundation of Chinese health preservation (Yang Shen), is that to be healthy and happy we need to live in harmony with the various cycles that govern nature, be it yearly, monthly, or daily. Living amongst the hustle and bustle of Big Cities, we often forget that we are part of nature, and therefore influenced by its cycles. Winter and night-times are periods of rest and repair. Fauna and flora hibernate, or at least rest and use less energy. We are the only beings fighting this time of rest, neglecting this crucial phase of gestation, the very beginning of the cycle of life! This very obviously applies to our health, as without this phase we get drained out, but also profound implications for everything else, from projects to personal development.

This intimate link between us and our environment explains our dip in health during Christmas: each phase of these cycle are associated with a pair of organs: in the case of the Winter and nighttime, the Kidney and Urinary Bladder. These are a set of functions rather than simply a solid organ. In Chinese Medicine, the Kidney includes the adrenal glands, reproduction system, but also bones, bone marrow, spine, brain and ears. Already damaged by lack of rest (not respecting Yin/night time), physical and mental overwork and age, our Kidney organ is put under further pressure by the cold of Winter; pathologies arise including lower back pain, fatigue, seasonal depression.

How to help yourself this Winter?

If you are suffering this season, it is best to seek help from a BAcC registered acupuncturist. Every being is different, so treatment and life style advice needs to be tailored to your specific needs. For

instance, not everyone feels the cold deep down to the core, and require moxa (heat) therapy. Beyond that, I would recommend the follow life style adaptations to winter to help preserve and rebuild your energy:

First of all, take to your winter quarters: slow down, hibernate and listen!

Unlike the unbridled abundance of the summer, winter time calls for preserving your energy, take advantage and sit by the fire place with a cup of cinnamon tea, or even mulled wine or cider to warm you up. I know it's tricky in the holiday season, but slow down as much as possible, in the evening, or at the week-end. So many patients have recently commented "I must stop". Indeed, take the opportunity to sleep more and allow your body to regenerate. Winter invites you to relax, let go, take a breath. Relish it!

Imagine a frozen lake. When all is calm and serene, far away from the buzz of the summer, we can stop and listen; all the sounds are clearer: it's time to turn our intention inward and truly listen to what our body and environment is telling us. This pause between in and out breath, this nothingness some of us dread, is absolutely crucial to all cycles in life: it's the ocean in which ideas are formed, it's the seed. Without the ability to return to this, we run around like headless chicken, exhausting our energy, and missing out on alternative path presented to us. So this Winter, take the time to savour being quiet and resourcing yourself.



Keep training, but adapt your regimen to Winter:

Cold freezes, so with it everything tightens up, including our bodies. Inactivity and heavier meals also stagnate our energy. So it's quite important to maintain enough movement in the body. However, it's also good to keep to moderate level, not to disperse our energy. If you are unwell, keep to indoors activities. And if you are well and practicing outside, keep your lower back and feet warm. And if you are not training, maybe it's time to listen and find out what you really like doing: joining a salsa class might be just as good, and a lot more fun than joining the gym (again).

Chinese Dietary Therapy to the rescue!

A well adapted diet is at the base of all healing, and conversely a bad diet will hinder any progress there. Traditionally they say that having a good stomach is good prognosis. Unfortunately dietary therapy is the part of Chinese Medicine that often gets neglected. In the Winter, your diet should support the organ pair which is associated with it, especially the Kidney. We also need to be eating fresh food in sync with the seasons at the place we live, to ensure that the food is full of nutrient, and adapted to our needs. According to Chinese Medicine, food are classified according to the effect they have on the body, rather than according to chemical composition. For instance cinnamon is warming, and completely adapted to English Winters. On the whole in Winter, steaming, soups, braising, and slow-cooking will soften the food and make them more digestible, allowing more of the nutrient to be absorbed. For most of us, we know instinctively that it is not the time for an all raw diet. And it would be even better to use spices that help the digestion and support the Kidney organ.

The dominant flavour associated with the Kidney is Salty. That doesn't mean add an excess of salt to your meals, however a little salt would be beneficial. For a list of foods to keep you healthy during the Winter time, see the box below. You can see the traditional holiday dishes emerging from there. Most of the herbs-spices in your kitchen are actually part of the Chinese pharmacopeia, and most of them are actually warming, so perfect for now! Particular favor cinnamon, cardamon, clove, curry, mixed spice, paprika, black pepper, cayenne, ginger, soy sauce. These are all the spices we traditionally use in stews, and for good reason! In the spirit of warding off the cold, prefer hot drinks, such as Christmas Tea, or simply cinnamon tea. (or mulled cider!!)

And finally, the Kidney is the source of your base energy, and helps us to withstand stress. During Winter we need to protect ourselves, recharge and resource, go back to the seed state, so that we can be born afresh in Spring, ready to take on new challenges. A very happy holidays to you all!



Vitality foods for the Winter include:

- Root vegetables, squash, cabbage, onion, leek
- Dates, longan berries, walnuts, hazelnuts, sweet chestnut, pistachio, dried prunes, and all the blue/purple fruits.
- Oats, spelt, quinoa, buckwheat, rice
- Lamb, beef, venison, duck, turkey, chicken, egg yolk, oily fish, oyster, seafood
- Aduki bean, black turtle beans, kidney beans, lentils, miso soup
- Garlic, dill, star anise, cinnamon, chive, coriander, fresh or dry ginger, clove, fennel seeds, nutmeg, cayenne, black pepper, Sichuan pepper, rosemary, thyme

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