



Summer - Beating the Heat with Herbs and Food

Each season nature gives us important clues how best to adjust to the changing weather patterns. The body and its functioning are a microcosm of the macrocosm of the patterns and rhythms of nature, meaning that each season mirrors what is happening simultaneously within our own bodies. Paying attention to nature's clues will help minimize typical seasonal ailments by pointing us to food, herb, and life practices that can help us live in harmony with the season.

Summer in Nature and Our Bodies

Summer is a time of activity when the energy of nature is at its most expansive. The light-filled hours of the day extend longer, while the quiet, dark time of night is at its shortest. Nature reaches its zenith and full bounty during the summer, with plants seeded in the spring bearing their fruit. The energy that was stored underground during the winter months bursts forth, and nature is abuzz with noise and activity. Insects and animals that were quiet and hidden are now out and about.

This same phenomenon is happening within our bodies, as well. During winter we replenished and stored our energy to prepare for the awakening and building of that dormant energy in spring, to its climax in summer. In summer our energy is at its most outward expression, meaning our ability to participate in the external world is at an all time high. In Chinese medicine, the natural element of fire represents the summer season. In summer, our inner fire is burning at its brightest, mirroring the heat and intensity of summer.

Physical Ailments of Summer

The intensity and frenetic activity of summer can lead to over-heating and over-activity, causing ailments such as heat exhaustion, tiredness, or sluggishness. All of the strong life force energy that began to emerge in spring has risen to the surface and is available for our use. Ideally, food and life practices adopted in the spring have helped to build blood and life force energy to allow our flames to burn bright during this time. However, without a balance of rest and activity, the internal fire can literally burn itself out, and we can expend our reserves of energy, leading to "burn out". Symptoms and ailments can also result during this time from an excess of heat in the body and manifest as heat exhaustion, headaches, colds, arthritis, hypertension, heart palpitations, or even excessive hunger, thirst, constipation, sour regurgitation, and nausea/vomiting.

Food, Life Practice, and Herbal Strategies for Summer



In summer we are often drawn to foods that will cool us down, such as raw fruits and vegetables, cold drinks, and ice cream, to balance the heat of the external environment. This type of diet will aggravate typical summer ailments. Foods with a cool energy do literally cool the body down and, consequently, weaken (by cooling) the digestive fires. This will translate literally into feelings of tiredness, lack of appetite, and decreased energy levels. While your body may have a stronger reserve of heating energy available, eating this way throughout summer will weaken the body's overall energy, leaving you more susceptible to allergies and colds associated with the fall season.

For those people whose energy is already depleted or low, it is even more important to eliminate cool, dampening foods from the diet during summer, such as iced drinks, ice cream, soy-based foods, and raw foods, as these foods will further deplete their energy. It is best to eat a good mix of fresh, in-season vegetables and fruits, light protein (such as white meat and fish), sprouted grains and legumes, while lightly spicing foods to help flavor them and to assist your body in assimilating them. Also, drink beverages at room temperature, rather than iced.

Summer is the ideal time to socialize and be with people. We have more energy to put into our relationships. It is also time to be outside gardening or enjoying the warmth and weather. It is very important, however, to pace yourself during this intensely active time. When a fire burns too intensely and brightly, it burns itself down to cold embers. The same is true of us in the summer, as too much activity and socializing can lead to burn out. While it is important to make use of the increased energy available to you, it is equally important to maintain your energy reserves. Ways to do this are resting during the heat of the day, not overdoing exercise and outdoor activities, prioritizing social activities and tasks, and eating healthily and regularly.

Appropriate herbs to use during summer are ones that have a cooling and drying energy. Herbs like chrysanthemum, lemon balm, mints, catnip, hibiscus, hawthorn berries, mung beans, and chamomile make refreshing teas you can make as a cool or warm infusion, depending on your preference. Cooking with the fresh herbs from your garden like basil, cilantro, dill, and oregano can help you to better assimilate your food. Other good herbs for summer are spicy herbs (chiles and peppers, as well as chrysanthemum and mints) in small amounts, as they help to open the pores and eliminate excess heat from the surface of the body. An excess of spicy foods and herbs can disperse too much of the body's heat to the surface, reducing the reserves available for the cooler seasons.



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