

EATING MEDICINE: FOOD AS PHARMACOLOGY

Mark A. Hyman, MD

Mark A. Hyman, MD, is the editor-in-chief of *Alternative Therapies in Health and Medicine*.

If people pay attention to the five flavors and mix them well, their bones will remain straight, their muscles will remain tender and young, their breath will circulate freely, their pores will be fine in texture, and consequently, their breath and bones will be filled with the essence of life.

—*The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine*

The world for eating in Chinese is comprised of two characters *chi* and *fan*, which means “eat rice.” The word for taking medicine is *chi yao*, or “eat medicine.” The ancient culinary traditions of China created meals for pleasure as well as for healing. Food provides taste, texture, delight, energy, and nourishment. In China, food also is a source of medicinal healing compounds that support well-being and health. On a recent trip to China, I realized that the average Chinese person knew more about the medicinal properties of food than I did after years of research. Medicinal foods are part of their everyday diet.

I was humbled and awed on that trip to Asia, where I lectured on prevention, wellness, health, nutrition, and the new field of *nutrigenomics*—the science of how molecules in food interact with our genes to support or interfere with our health. I learned more from the broad knowledge of the Chinese people and the matter-of-fact discussions of the healing properties of the food that I shared with my hosts than I did from my hours of researching current medical journals. A top executive of the Asian branch of Merrill Lynch and his wife took me to dinner at a fine Chinese restaurant. Each dish delighted my palate and satisfied my stomach, and with each bite I was aware that I was eating medicine. Modern scientists are rapidly discovering new molecules in food that have medicinal properties and enhance health through improving the function of genes and metabolism. The ancient Chinese have incorporated this knowledge into their cuisine for thousands of years. There is no distinction between food and medicine in Asia. People there eat their medicine.

In America, where I work and teach, I spend most of my efforts educating people that food *is* medicine. I encourage my patients to eat their medicine and heal through food. The notion that food provides anything other than calories for energy and sustaining life is foreign to most Westerners. *Food contains information* that speaks to our genes. In Asia, I was speaking to the

converted, simply illuminating with science what they apply every day and have for thousands of years. Dinner in Asia is a date with the doctor.

In this issue of *Alternative Therapies in Health and Medicine*, a scientific review of the effects of glucomannan—a soluble fiber derived from the Asian potato-like tuber *Amorphophallus konjac*—and obesity establishes the value of traditional foods as medicine. Long used to make *konnyaku*, a jelly prepared in Japan for more than 1,500 years, the medicinal properties and multiple benefits of konjac fiber or glucomannan were appreciated as early as the 6th century. Konjac is much more viscous than usual fibers, retaining up to 17 times its weight in water. Expanding in the stomach and the small and large intestines, it absorbs fat, accelerates elimination, reduces cholesterol, blunts sugar absorption, and facilitates weight loss, in part by increasing feelings of satiety.

Dinner with my hosts was full of wonderfully presented, delicious, and sometimes mysterious ingredients. Some of the ingredients were unusual, such as the mild, crunchy white tree fungus, *bai mu er*, which enhances detoxification and improves the complexion. The mixed vegetable dish that also included sweet, oval, nutty, powerful antioxidant ginkgo nuts, which are a powerful antioxidant, was prepared to help increase circulation and improve cognitive function. The earthy *shitake* or Chinese black mushrooms that were served boost immunity, and the crisp, deep green *gai lan* or Chinese broccoli contains glucosinolates that promote detoxification and prevent cancer. It is also rich in minerals, such as calcium and magnesium, folic acid and many other vitamins and antioxidants. At the beginning of the meal, I was treated to shark fin soup, a delicacy from the cartilage of a shark's fin that is known to help arthritis and may fight cancer. The deep red crispy Peking duck skin is colored with Chinese red rice yeast, known to contain a statin-like substance that lowers cholesterol. A mellow fish maw and ginseng soup increases energy, helps us adapt to stress, and provides easily digested protein and omega 3 fatty acids. The chicken with ginger and bitter melon that we ate is believed to reduce inflammation and help detoxification and blood sugar balance.

Even desert was healing. A warm, barely sweet *longhan* soup with lotus seeds and quail eggs was soothing and nourishing. *Longhan* improves blood pressure and anemia; lotus seeds enhance male sexual function, alleviate diarrhea, and calms, reducing palpitations; and quail eggs are an easily digestible source of protein, folate, and choline and they reduce the overall

sugar load of this mildly sweetened desert. A cooling gelatin of aloe and lemon balm washed down the dinner while acting as an anti-inflammatory. Aromatic Jasmine tea, a green tea that improves metabolism, enhances detoxification, reduces inflammation and the risk for cancer, and helps chelate heavy metals in food, accompanied the meal

The limited knowledge of Western science about food is overshadowed by the centuries-old Chinese wisdom of using medicinal foods to fill the belly, nourish the soul, and heal the body. If we recognize that we all *chi yao*—eat medicine—then achieving robust health may not be such a bitter pill to swallow.