

Traditional Chinese Food Therapy: A Different Approach to Selecting Foods

Whenever I mention Traditional Chinese Medicine to a dog owner, most immediately think of acupuncture and, to a lesser extent, Chinese herbal medicine. A modality less understood is food therapy, which is another way of looking at food that has been practised for thousands of years.

Traditional Chinese Food Therapy is part of Traditional Chinese Veterinary Medicine (TCVM), an approach that views food as much more than simply a source of calories and nutrients. According to TCVM, every ingredient has its own energetic properties that may influence the body's internal balance. Food therapy aims to match foods to the individual dog's constitution, lifestyle and health.

Looking beyond the food bowl

Traditional Chinese Food Therapy does not replace the nutritional requirements that are backed by scientific research. Instead, it adds another layer of thinking by considering how different foods may affect the body's internal balance.

One of the most appealing aspects of food therapy is that it recognises that no two dogs are exactly alike.

An energetic young Border Collie living in Central Otago may have very different dietary needs from a senior Bulldog living on the warmer Northland coast.

Understanding 'hot' and 'cold'

One of the most misunderstood aspects of Traditional Chinese Food Therapy is the idea of "hot" and "cold." These terms do not refer to the temperature at which food is served.

Instead, they describe the traditional energetic effect that foods are believed to have within the body.

A dog showing signs that TCVM would classify as excessive "Heat" may display restlessness, red or inflamed skin, hot ears or paws, itchy skin, or be excessively thirsty.

Conversely, a dog showing a traditional "Cold" pattern may appear to be slow or lethargic, reluctance to exercise, sensitive in the cold weather, stiff after rising and seeking warm places to sleep.

These descriptions are part of traditional Chinese medical theory and should not be confused with medical diagnoses. Dogs showing these signs should always receive a veterinary examination to identify any underlying disease.

Cooling, Warming And Neutral Foods

Foods are commonly grouped according to their traditional energetic properties.

Cooling foods are traditionally believed to help balance excessive heat. Examples include duck, white fish, barley, celery, spinach and cucumber.

Warming foods are traditionally used for dogs to balance excessive cold. Examples include lamb, venison, chicken, and oats.

Neutral foods are considered suitable for maintaining general balance and are often used as the foundation of a diet. Examples including beef, lentils, carrots and apple.

Seasonal feeding

Many TCVM practitioners also consider the changing seasons.

During warmer months, slightly more cooling foods may be incorporated into the diet, while winter may see a greater emphasis on warming ingredients. Of course, any dietary changes should be introduced gradually and remain nutritionally balanced.

A balanced approach

Interest in Traditional Chinese Veterinary Medicine has increased significantly over the past two decades. Often, dog owners are pleasantly surprised that their dog's medical diagnosis also matches a TCVM assessment of imbalance – such as an arthritic dog being assessed as having a cold pattern.

The scientific evidence specifically supporting Traditional Chinese Food Therapy remains limited.

Most publications describe traditional theory, clinical experience or case reports. Large, well-designed clinical trials evaluating the effectiveness of food therapy for specific canine diseases are still relatively scarce.

This does not necessarily mean food therapy is ineffective. Rather, it highlights the need for more research.

Whether you are a dog owner or breeder, it is worth remembering that every dog has unique nutritional requirements. Puppies, working dogs, and seniors all have different dietary needs that must be met using sound nutritional principles.

Food therapy should, therefore, be viewed as complementary rather than alternative. 

This column represents the author's reflections on her interaction with the dog world and does not necessarily reflect any official position of Dogs New Zealand.



Bone broth is one of the most common toppers to make at home. Your choice of protein in the broth may be based on TCVM food therapy.