



77

ways

to improve
your
wellbeing

How to use
**Ancient Chinese
Wisdom** to
enhance your
physical, mental
and spiritual
health

ANGELA HICKS

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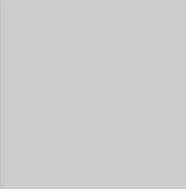
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Contents

Author's note	x
Introduction	xi
Chapter 1. You Can Be Really Well	1
You really can live longer!	1
What's in this for you?	2
An ounce of prevention is better than a pound of cure	4
Living a <i>qi</i> enhancing lifestyle	5
The true 'pill' – lifestyle change	5
Listen to your body	6
What will be the benefits?	6
How to read this book	7
Chapter 2. The Secrets of Healthy Eating	9
Eat food as medicine	9
Wellbeing tips 1–21	
1. Balance the proportions of your food	10
2. Rely on 'economical' foods in your daily diet	13
3. Choose vegetables – full of rich, life-enhancing <i>qi</i>	15
4. Avoid too much raw and cold food	17
5. Don't overdose on 'rich' foods	18
6. Know your phlegm and damp forming food	19
7. Lose weight effortlessly!	21
8. Be an 'almost' vegetarian	22

9. If you are vegetarian – be a well-balanced one	25
10. Take good-quality food	27
11. Avoid ‘spoiled’ foods	29
12. An enjoyable diet is the most nourishing	29
13. Know the temperature of your food	33
14. Not <i>too</i> hot or cold – keep it balanced	35
15. Blend the tastes of your food	36
16. Find tasty substitutes	40
17. Eat regularly and in the right conditions	42
18. Try sprouting – nutritious food from tiny seedlings	46
19. Know how and when to drink fluids	48
20. Drink green tea or other healthy drinks	49
21. Be alert for food sensitivities	50

Chapter 3. Balance Your Emotions **55**

Our emotions and our health 55

Wellbeing tips 22–36

22. Emotions are a key to good health	57
23. Anger makes <i>qi</i> rise	60
24. Fear makes <i>qi</i> descend and worry knots the <i>qi</i>	62
25. Grief and sadness dissolve <i>qi</i>	64
26. Joy slows <i>qi</i> down	66
27. Take pleasure from the world	67
28. The importance of humour	69
29. Gain perspective on your emotions	71
30. Become present to your bodily ‘felt sense’	72
31. Learn from your difficulties	77
32. Use talking therapy	78
33. Use writing therapy	79
34. The importance of positive goals	80
35. Release your blocked feelings	84
36. Get help when you need it	86

Chapter 4. Adjusting Work, Rest and Exercise	88
The balance of work, rest and exercise	88
Wellbeing tips 37–55	
37. Balance <i>yin</i> and <i>yang</i> in your work and rest	89
38. Convalescence – the forgotten secret	92
39. The positive effects of fulfilling work	94
40. Keep your life regular	95
41. Points to relieve smoker’s cravings	96
42. Exercise while you work	98
43. Walk your way to health	99
44. Sleep – the best natural cure	101
45. Sleep in a healthy posture	103
46. Take a ‘power’ nap	104
47. Make time for rest and relaxation	106
48. Scan your body to relax	107
49. Exercise can be ‘internal’ or ‘external’	109
50. Exercise according to your age, activity, build and constitution	113
51. Know the 70% principle for all activity	114
52. Find an exercise routine	115
53. Find a regular practice space	116
54. Exercise in the ‘spirit’ of <i>qigong</i>	118
55. A simple self-exercise more effective than massage	120
Chapter 5. Protecting Yourself from the Environment	123
How the weather effects our health	123
Wellbeing tips 56–65	
56. Take extra care when there’s a cold snap	124
57. Your pain might be caused by cold!	126
58. Cold can cause infertility and other lower body symptoms	128
59. A well-kept secret – the effects of ‘wind’	130
60. How to prevent colds, flu and other acute problems	133
61. Tired all the time? ‘Damp’ could be the cause	135
62. Protect yourself from the effects of damp	137

63. Dryness – of course it dries you up!	139
64. Know how to beat the heat	140
65. Flow with the seasons to stay healthy	143

Chapter 6. Respecting Your Constitution **145**

Our constitutional essence and long-term health 145

Wellbeing tips 66–77

66. Conserve your constitutional essence	146
67. How to check your constitutional strength	149
68. Accept your limits and live within their confines	150
69. Your sexual activity affects your constitutional essence	152
70. ‘Do the month’ after pregnancy	155
71. Important transformation times that can change your life	157
72. The male menopause is not what you think!	160
73. After a miscarriage take time to rest	160
74. Strengthen your constitutional essence at the <i>dantien</i>	161
75. What you learn from a good teacher becomes yours for life	164
76. Use Chinese metal balls as a simple longevity tool	165
77. ‘Scrape’ on the back to strengthen constitution	166

Chapter 7. Staying Healthy and Preventing Disease **168**

• Asthma	169
• Anxiety and panic attacks	172
• Back pain	175
• Chronic fatigue syndrome	178
• Colds and flu	181
• Constipation	184
• Depression	187
• Diabetes	189
• Diarrhoea	193
• Headaches	195
• Hypertension	198

• Indigestion and heartburn	201
• Insomnia	203
• Joint problems	206
• Menopausal hot flushes	209
• Period pains	211
• Premenstrual tension	213
• Skin conditions	215

Chapter 8. Sixteen Tips To Improve Your Lifestyle **218**

<i>Tip no. 1</i>	Four important stages of integrating lifestyle changes	218
<i>Tip no. 2</i>	Refine your intention	218
<i>Tip no. 3</i>	Know what's stopping you	219
<i>Tip no. 4</i>	Prepare to change your lifestyle	219
<i>Tip no. 5</i>	Put your lifestyle plan into action	220
<i>Tip no. 6</i>	Completion and integration – make a new adjustment into a regular habit	221
<i>Tip no. 7</i>	Find ways to become motivated	221
<i>Tip no. 8</i>	Make your goals specific and achievable	222
<i>Tip no. 9</i>	Allow yourself some imperfections	223
<i>Tip no. 10</i>	Take teeny tiny steps	224
<i>Tip no. 11</i>	Do what you find enjoyable	225
<i>Tip no. 12</i>	Find healthy substitutes	226
<i>Tip no. 13</i>	Change at your own speed	226
<i>Tip no. 14</i>	It takes a month to change a habit	227
<i>Tip no. 15</i>	See yourself changing your lifestyle	227
<i>Tip no. 16</i>	Don't just read about it – use it!	228

Notes	230
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Glossary	237
----------	-----

Reading list	240
--------------	-----

Useful addresses	241
------------------	-----

Index	242
-------	-----



Author's note

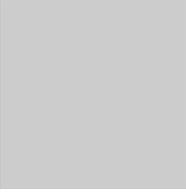
My thanks to everyone who has helped me to write this book.

First, my thanks to the practitioners and patients who have been so willing to talk to me about their experiences of acupuncture, herbs and making lifestyle changes.

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Finally, my love and appreciation to my husband John, who has supported and encouraged me throughout the time I was writing this book.

Please note that the organs and some other words have slightly different meanings when used in a Chinese medicine rather than a Western medicine context. With this in mind I have capitalized all Organs when they are used in a Chinese medicine context and used lower case if I am using them in a Western medicine context.



Introduction

I still remember when I first studied Chinese medicine. As I learned parts of the theory about *yin* and *yang*, *qi* and the Five Elements my perspective on life was transformed and, over thirty years later I'm still fascinated – and healthy!

I found one particular part of the theory especially empowering. It was the knowledge of what causes disease and how we can remain healthy. Chinese medicine had a viewpoint about the prevention of disease that was totally new to me. It was sensible and down-to-earth and yet capable of changing lives.

Before studying Chinese medicine I had never really thought about why we become ill. I had assumed that some people were 'unlucky' and became unhealthy whilst others were lucky and managed to stay well. Health seemed to be a game of chance.

Times are changing. Thankfully many people now understand that there are underlying causes to their illnesses and that they can participate in their own wellbeing. At the same time there is an impending crisis within the medical profession. Deaths from cancer, strokes and heart disease are increasing. A stay in hospital seems to risk infection and the costs of the National Health Service are spiraling out of control. This is good reason for us to look after our own health and to keep ourselves well.

The Chinese have one of the few cultures that has preserved accurate knowledge about how to stay healthy. This lifestyle advice has been documented in a way that it is easy to follow. By following it we have a better chance of remaining well throughout our lives.

This book describes many of these useful ways in which Chinese medicine suggests we can keep ourselves well. It is written in the form of seventy-seven ‘wellbeing tips’. Understanding these ‘tips’ will enable us to improve and maintain our health and prevent many illnesses in the future. I have also included modern research that backs up the Chinese view.

As a teacher and practitioner of Chinese medicine I often hear stories of patients who have improved their health enormously or who are now maintaining good health by changing lifestyle. In this book I have drawn many examples from these people. Some people have gained this lifestyle advice from a practitioner. Going to a practitioner for treatment can be an important step when we are ill. These treatments can also help to maintain our health. But if we only have treatment ‘done to us’ and go back to the lifestyle that has made us sick, we may not stay well.

This book is for all of us who want to sustain our health. It provides guidelines to enable us to do so. I hope you can receive the benefits that so many have enjoyed.

Good luck and good health!

1

You Can Be Really Well

You really can live longer!

People can extend their lives by up to 14 years by not smoking, drinking moderately, eating healthily and keeping physically active. A study surveyed 20,244 men and women aged between 45 and 79. Those who had smoked, drank, failed to exercise and had not eaten enough fruit and vegetables, were four times more likely to have died during a period between 1993 and 2006, than those who didn't.¹

In the 21st century people are becoming increasingly aware that there are many benefits to be gained from a healthy lifestyle. They realize that they can not only extend their lives and become healthier, they can also feel more contented and positive and have more vitality, stamina and clarity of mind.

Chinese medicine practitioners have observed and used the principles of a healthy lifestyle for thousands of years. As a general rule Chinese people have tended to place a higher priority on maintaining their health than have Western people.

A survey carried out by the office of Population Censuses and Surveys in England in the 1990s illustrates the benefits they gain from their attitude.² This research found that only 29% of Chinese pensioners have serious and long-lasting illnesses, compared to 36% of white people and 43% of people of Indian or Pakistani origin. These statistics are truly stunning – especially bearing in mind that most of the people included in this census were living in an unfamiliar culture. In China itself we would expect the results to have been even more spectacular.³

The *Nei Jing* or *The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine* is China's most famous medical textbook and contains advice about health and lifestyle. It was written in about 200 BCE. Since that time Chinese medicine has developed practical guidelines based on how lifestyle affected people's wellbeing. By paying attention to the way we eat, sleep, work and exercise as well as balancing our emotions, Chinese medicine practitioners were aware of what modern research is only just discovering. Lifestyle can have a huge impact on our health, happiness and longevity.

Chinese health 'secrets' were tried and tested over thousands of years. They have been passed down through families and have been quoted by the great Chinese doctors. As a result they are guidelines we can rely on and are quite different from various food and lifestyle 'fads' in the West.

Unfortunately the pressures of the 21st century often lead people away from a lifestyle that can benefit their physical, mental and spiritual wellbeing. This book gives you Chinese medicine's profound yet simple guidelines to enable you to deal with these stresses.

What's in this for you?

There are many positive gains to be made from a healthy lifestyle. Table 1 gives some potential negative and positive effects. Although we can't avoid all diseases, we do know that every illness has a cause. The main causes of disease discovered by Chinese medicine over 2,000 years ago are still as relevant today. They form the chapter headings of the book and the first column in the table. Please be aware that this is just an overview and there are many more positive and negative affects that can be had.

Table 1. The positive and negative effects of a healthy lifestyle.

Lifestyle area	Unbalanced	Balanced
Diet	Tiredness and lethargy Becoming overweight Food reactions and sensitivities Physical pains and discomfort Physical illnesses	Energy and vigour Staying slim A feeling of wellbeing Ease of movement Freedom from disease
Emotions	Anxiety and agitation Foggy mind Isolation and alienation Feeling miserable and overly serious Easily defeated Feeling stuck in a rut	Internal peace Mental clarity An ability to deal with intimacy A good sense of humour Emotional resilience Ability to use setbacks to grow
Work, rest and exercise	Poor health and tiredness Dissatisfaction and boredom Pain and stiffness Numbness of body and decreased awareness Tension and tight muscles Overweight and muscle wasting	Good health and vitality Fulfillment in work life Fluid and easy movement Increased consciousness and body awareness Liveliness, relaxation and calmness A slim and well-toned body
Climate	Succumbing to physical illnesses Inability to fight disease Pain, discomfort and immobilization Illness due to unseasonal activity	Freedom from physical illness Strong immune system Feeling of vitality and wellbeing Flowing and adjusting with the seasons
Constitution	Degeneration and ageing A painful and miserable old age Over-extending self leading to exhaustion	Youthfulness and longevity Vitality and vigour into old age Living within confines of constitution

An ounce of prevention is better than a pound of cure

The consequences of an unhealthy lifestyle often take time to emerge and we can damage our health without knowing it. A bad diet or lack of exercise, for example, may take years before producing a symptom. The practice of a healthy lifestyle is important in order to prevent illness. Prevention means acting *before* the problems manifest.

Illnesses that are easily prevented

Some illnesses are easy to avoid with simple lifestyle changes. Here are two examples.

A colleague had a patient whose children had stomach pains. The patient wanted to bring them to have acupuncture treatment. This practitioner asked what they ate and was told that their diet included a lot of cold food such as iced drinks and ice cream. My colleague suggested that although treatment would be possible, they should first try reducing the amount of cold food the children were eating. The patient returned two weeks later and told him that they had taken his advice and were amazed because this simple solution had cured the stomach pains. Chinese medicine understands the effects of cold in the diet. You will find out more in Chapter 2 on diet and in Chapter 4 on the effects of the climate.

Most of us also make choices with regard to the balance of our work, rest and exercise. For example, if we work and don't rest for long periods then we can get worn out and may succumb to illnesses more easily. Illnesses such as chronic fatigue, frequent colds and flu, anxiety, tiredness, depression and many other conditions, may be due to returning to work before we are really better.

Recently a patient with chronic fatigue syndrome told me that she regretted not convalescing when she was ill with a severe infection. She returned to work before she was better and is now reaping the consequences. She realized that a change in her lifestyle habits would have prevented this illness.

Events we can't predict

Life will never be totally predictable, however, and other illnesses are less easy to avoid. Stresses like bereavement, accidents and other emotional traumas can't be avoided and can certainly take their toll on our health. We can compare a healthy lifestyle to an insurance policy. Good lifestyle habits will enable us to cope better through unexpected crises and help us to prevent illness in the future.

We've taken a glimpse at Chinese medicine in relation to illness. To understand the Chinese medicine view of health, we need to find out more about *qi*, which can be translated as energy.

Living a *qi* enhancing lifestyle

Chinese medicine teaches us that our health is dependent on the balance of the *qi* (pronounced and sometimes written down as chi) in our bodies. *Qi* is our life force. When we have abundant *qi* that is flowing smoothly then we are healthy physically, mentally and spiritually. When our *qi* is deficient or blocked, we become unhealthy.

Although *qi* cannot be seen, it nevertheless penetrates every cell, allowing us to feel, think, move and have vitality. When we die the *qi* has left our body and the life force has gone. A lifestyle that enhances our *qi* will sustain our health. A lifestyle that weakens or blocks our *qi* will cause us to lose our health. We can decide between these two options.

The true 'pill' – lifestyle change

Practitioners of Chinese medicine look at the balance of each person's *qi* and view each individual as a whole – this includes their environment and lifestyle.

Most of us now know that lifestyle affects our health but we are still oriented towards a Western viewpoint of disease. If we have something 'wrong' with us, we expect a pill to take it away. When we go to a doctor they often feel obliged

to hand us a prescription. If this doesn't work then we feel we haven't had the right thing 'done' to us.

In comparison, practitioners of Chinese medicine assess each individual as a whole and look for the cause of a person's problem. They understand that most Western medicines will only take away a symptom. The medicines will bring temporary improvement but won't deal with the underlying cause, so we can expect the symptom to return or a new symptom to appear later. Chinese medicine understands the true 'pill' – lifestyle change. We need to adapt our lifestyle to support our health and happiness.

Listen to your body

When we are ill we need to pay more attention to our health. In reality this is often when we feel least able to cope. We may take as many short cuts as possible. For example, eating 'fast' food makes our lives easier and many people are attracted to poor-quality foods when their *qi* is weak.

A friend recently commented that she noticed that if she was tense and stressed then she tended to eat fatty and sweet food like chocolate bars. The quality of these foods could further weaken her *qi* over a period of time. She then went on to say that if she gives herself the opportunity to do yoga or *qigong* (see page 118) and relax, then the desire to eat these foods goes away. She then ends up looking forward to eating a wholesome meal.

Ignoring the body's messages leads to illness and discomfort, while paying heed enables us to enjoy the benefits of health and happiness.

What will be the benefits?

All of us can benefit from some simple adjustments to our lifestyle. This can mean increased vitality, greater wellbeing or many of the other benefits shown in Table 1.

Improvements may be to do with current problems and many ‘named’ diseases can be affected. These may include digestive and bowel disorders, headaches, joint problems, mental and emotional complaints, circulatory disorders, gynaecological conditions, skin diseases, chest complaints and reproductive disorders, to name only a few. By modifying our lifestyle we can expect to feel healthier physically, mentally and spiritually.

If we are really ill it is always best to go to a doctor or a practitioner of Chinese medicine such as an acupuncturist or herbalist. Chinese medicine will increase our *qi* and help to restore our health. If we have treatment from a Chinese medicine practitioner this can then give us the strength to make necessary changes to our lifestyle. We can always benefit from living healthily and keeping ourselves well creates long-lasting changes in our health.

How to read this book

This book gives you wellbeing tips about all aspects of your life. You may want to read through each chapter in turn, then go back to try out one or two of the suggestions from the Action Boxes. Or you may wish to dip in and out of different sections trying the suggested actions as you go. At the end of this book you will find some additional useful tips about how to make lifestyle adjustments. Remember that it’s important to change at your own speed – small changes can often have a major impact.

I’d like to remind you of two final points:

- **First, the process of change takes time.** Some changes take only a short time to carry out, but it may take years to truly integrate others into our lives. If we are patient with ourselves we may be surprised to find that we are making alterations quite effortlessly and find that we are naturally living a healthy lifestyle.
- **Second, we can’t expect to be perfect.** Life is a process of growth and development and we can use our ‘failures’ as feedback for the future. Through trial and error we’ll find out the best ways to live our lives to a healthy old age.