

## The Practical Herbalist -- Bird Flu and Kimchi

Recent news articles (Nov. 2005) suggested that eating sauerkraut could protect you from the bird flu. To clarify, scientists in Asia fed an extract of a Korean dish, Kimchi, to flu infected chickens and many of them seemed to get better. Our local media, has been talking about german style sauerkraut as a possible flu treatment ever since. The media has failed us in its coverage and explanation of this story. Lets look at what this is really all about.

First off, I have made and eaten sauerkraut, and made and eaten Korean Kimchi. Yes they are both made from fermented cabbage, and that is where the similarities end. Sauerkraut, as every Wisconsinite knows is ... well ...sour. Kimchi, on the other hand is burn your mouth out and feel it in your stomach for days, hot and spicy. It has splashes of flaming red color that warn anyone familiar with Asia cuisine that if you don't have a cast iron stomach, this could hurt you. Kimchi is cabbage fermented with a lot of red peppers, garlic and ginger. It is not a dish for the faint of heart.

So of all the foods that you could feed chickens to try to treat the flu, why would you use kimchi? The answer is traditional herbal folk medicine. Infectious disease is seen by traditional medicines as an "external pathogenic influence". In systems of medicine, prior to germ/viral theory of modern medicine, it was recognized that people could get sick from something that passed between people. They called it evil spirits, evil wind, but whatever you called it, it was understood that people could "catch" a cold or flu from the people around them. This is not that far off from our modern understanding of how viruses are passed.

So if the "evil spirit"/virus came from outside the body, The logical treatment was to find a way to force the "evil spirit"/virus back out of the body. This was done using very strong pungent herbs and spices that caused sweating. Sweating is seen as a release of energy out of the body, which would in turn hopefully carry the "evil spirit"/virus out with it. The explanation I once got is that a virus/germ is like a burglar entering your house, the herbal treatment is to turn up the heat real high, open all the doors and windows and bang pots to scare the burglar out. The biomedical concept is to shoot the burglar.

There is some evidence that during the SARS epidemic many people in Asia, knowing a little folk medicine, started eating more spicy food to ward off the disease. They of course would have grabbed everyone's favorite hot food found in every Asia food store, kimchi. It is my belief that the scientists heard people proclaiming kimchi as a wonder food that protected them from SARS. Many hot spices do have some scientifically documented antibiotic and anti viral activity. So concerned about bird flu, it is logical that scientists would have tested this theory on the only available bird flu infected subjects they could find, Chickens.

The real story is that the use of pungent spices can help a person overcome an infectious disease. This is true with bird flu as well as the common cold. This very important bit of information is the real story that was missed by the local media.

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