Soup: Why do we eat it when we're ill?

By Anna-Louise Taylor - BBC News

Advances in medical science come and nutritional fads go, but we keep on eating soup to get better when we're ill. It's been the same for centuries and new research suggests why.



On the sofa or tucked up in bed feeling ill? Chances are you're tucking into some hot soup to help you feel better. It's what your grandparents would have done, their grandparents and generations before that.

Convalescent cookery has remained "remarkably constant" for centuries, according to new research published by Ken Albala, a food historian at the University of the Pacific in California. This is despite huge changes in the way we eat and major shifts in nutritional theory and medicine.

As far back as the 12th Century, physicians were recommending chicken soup - known as "Jewish penicillin" - to combat a cold. Modern science has since found their instincts were largely right and it can be soothing and anti-inflammatory for those with colds.

It was still the same in 16th Century, when common wisdom was to give "nourishing, restorative, light and easily digested food" to the sick. Soups, broths and bread-based gruels were advised. The nutritional benefits are obvious. A healthy soup provides an easy way to digest the nutrients we need, especially when we're ill.

But Albala's latest research suggests soup's appeal could actually be down to an "informal intuition" people have always had when it comes to feeding the sick. And rather than being based on science, it is more likely to be influenced by baby food.

"Even today... most people would intuitively think of ideal food for convalescents in much the same terms as people five centuries ago," he says. "It seems that rather than foods scientifically determined to help recovery, these are mostly comfort foods... they stem from long custom rather than any empirically verifiable nutritional facts."

Soup's close appearance to baby food is a big reason why we eat it when ill, he suggests. Both are nutritious without being hard to digest, and the way both are prepared means they are "predigested" before being served.

"The idea of what convalescents should eat, it's analogous to baby food - nutritious without giving off any digestive 'heat'," he says. "Logically it makes sense. It's definitely a matter of comfort and going back to basics."



The power of chicken soup

- *Also known as "Jewish penicillin"*
- *The 12th Century physician Maimonides recommended eating chicken soup to combat a cold*
- *A US study found chicken soup could help those with colds as it has anti-inflammatory properties that stem the flow of mucus*
- *Protein from chicken and antioxidants from vegetables also help the body make virus-killing antibodies*