

Eastern Medicine Goes West

Dr Lily Liu blends traditional Chinese wisdom with scientific verification to treat women's health disorders. *Samantha McKay*



Many Western women accept that period pain, premenstrual tension and uncomfortable menopausal symptoms are all part of 'a woman's lot.' There may also be the sadness of infertility or miscarriages, or problems like endometriosis. Not so, says Dr Lily Liu, a graduate in traditional Chinese medicine from Beijing University. She is confident the majority of female health disorders can be prevented with proper nutrition, exercise and certain special remedies which redress imbalances in body energy flows.

In traditional Chinese medicine the emphasis is on these various body energies, rather than on anatomy and physiology as is the case with Western medicine. These energies flow through meridians and are closely related to major organs, influencing whatever tissue they flow through. Each meridian is usually named after the major organ it is associated with, such as the liver, kidney or spleen.

For example, the main liver meridian (see Diagram 1) flows bilaterally from the big toe up through the leg and inner thigh, circling the pelvic area and lower abdomen, then rises up the body and ends at chest level. Secondary branches track on through the throat and eyes to the top of the head. Blocked liver energy will, therefore, produce symptoms in any of these areas. In Chinese medicine, nothing happens in isolation. Period pain is also related to blocked liver meridian energy. 'That is why women experience sore breasts, tender flanks and headaches or visual

disturbances during their period,' says Dr Liu.

There are two varieties of period pain: one is sharp and stabbing, the other cold and dull. 'Sharp, stabbing pain is a sign of blood stagnation,' explains Dr Liu. 'Over time this can turn into a burning, indicating that toxic heat has developed. I have noticed this especially in endometriosis cases.' The cold, dull type of pain, which is usually eased by a hot water bottle, is primarily a blood and energy deficiency sign. 'These two types of pain give clues as to a woman's basic constitution and are very important. They are not just temporary abnormalities,' adds Liu.

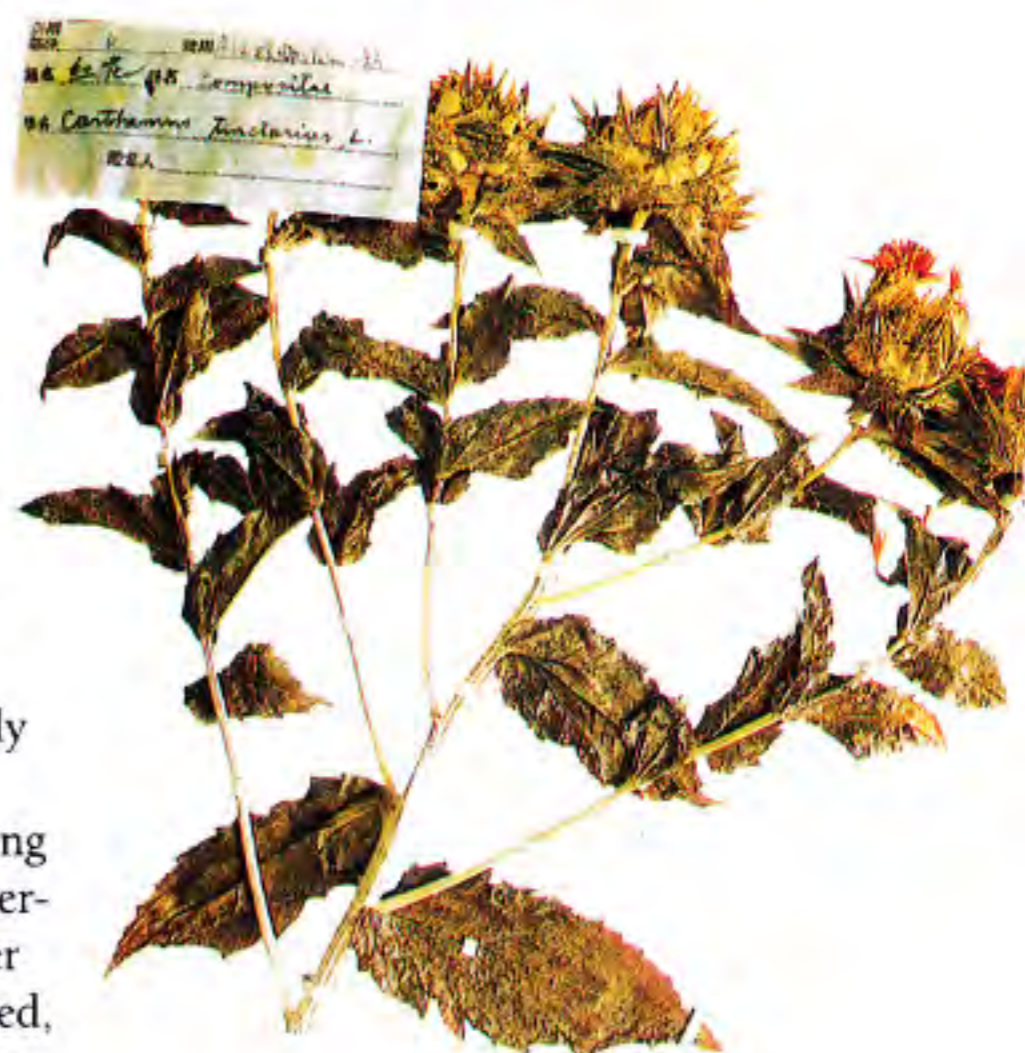
Healing herbs

Treatment usually begins at the end of a period. Explains Liu, 'When a period is finished I prescribe herbs to settle the cycle, replenish blood loss and clear the liver meridian in preparation for ovulation. During ovulation different herbs are used to strengthen the kidney energy and release the liver and spleen energies to do their work. It is invariably blocked liver energy which creates emotional tension and stress.'

In traditional Chinese medicine, the body's energies are described in terms of yin and yang. Yin is primarily a cold, passive, descending energy while yang is a hot, vigorous, ascending one. Both flow through the body's meridians and trouble comes when either becomes imbalanced. This is expressed, in diagnostic terms, as being deficient

or in excess, much as 'excess' water will put out a fire but a 'deficiency' will dry a substance out. When imbalances occur certain 'hot' or 'cold' constitutional conditions and symptoms result. Paradoxically, hot conditions are caused by a deficiency of yin and cold ones by a lack of yang.

'For instance,' explains Dr Liu, 'a woman with a yin deficiency will have excess heat in her body and therefore can become constipated during menstruation. When her bleeding does occur, it will often be heavy and full of clots.' A 'hot' condition can also produce diarrhoea. 'The excess heat can deplete the spleen's energy which has much to do with digestion – hence the diarrhoea,' explains Liu. 'Vomiting, stomach upsets, severe headaches or migraines, sore red eyes, hot flushes,



dizziness, ringing in the ears and extreme irritability are all signs of excess heat in the liver meridian. So is a redder-than-usual tongue with a scanty coating.' It may seem logical for a person with a 'hot' condition to seek relief in cold foods or drinks, but no. 'They are hot because the yin or cold energy is blocked,' says Dr Liu. 'Intake of cold substances further aggravates the condition.'

In a 'cold' condition the blood is pale and the flow weak; there may be spotting, which indicates deficiency and stagnation of both blood and energy. This may be further aggravated by a 'damp' condition, the traditional term for accumulated mucus. A patient like this is generally pale and tired during her period. She has no energy. Her period may come late or not at all and she may experience dizzy spells or palpitations when it does. It's also likely she'll have severe PMT and sore breasts or flanks at period time.

Blood stagnation

Late or scanty periods, or none, all point to different types of blood stagnation. Some women have PMT without any bleeding at all. Another type of blood stagnation manifests with diarrhoea and a pale complexion. 'These women generally hate to get up in the morning and have barely enough energy to talk or move,' says Liu. 'Often they retain water, making them look and feel bloated, and they are usually overweight. They eat too much and they're forever dieting – but the real problem is spleen deficiency, which makes their vital energy low.'

Dr Liu comments she is surprised few Western women can tell her what their period is like. 'Information about blood and its flow confirms diagnosis. Every aspect of bodily function, including menstruation, is important. No one is the same and I like to have the complete picture before I prescribe any medication.' For preference she recommends pads rather than tampons, as they do not impede the flow and offer less risk of infection.

THE ORIENTAL PERSPECTIVE

INFERTILITY

In traditional Chinese medicine, 'infertility' concerns more than just the reproductive system. It may indicate kidney or liver energy deficiency, blood stagnation, the accumulation of mucus through the body or stress. 'People really don't see how stress can cause infertility,' says Dr Liu. 'However, unrelieved stress can lead to energy blockages which then impede the processes of conception.'

PREGNANCY

Much vital energy is used up in the development of the foetus and again in delivery. 'In China, women are prescribed certain herbs during pregnancy to build themselves up against this energy loss,' says Dr Liu. 'After the birth they are given other herbs to expel any leftover debris, replenish blood supplies and re-establish the menstrual cycle. It is important that the new mother rest for at least three to four weeks after delivery to ensure those blood and energy levels are restored.'

THE PILL

Like many practitioners of traditional Chinese medicine, Dr Liu is concerned about the extended use of the contraceptive pill amongst young girls. 'It interrupts the immature menstrual cycle, causes imbalance of hormonal levels and generally weakens vital energies – which can predispose infertility.'

EARLY SEXUAL ACTIVITY

Similarly, she considers sexual intercourse should not occur before the age of 18, in either sex. 'Early sex causes yin deficiency because the sex energy is not fully developed. The average marrying age in China is around 25 years. The problem in the West is that girls are having sex too early and babies too late. 'The ideal time for pregnancy is between 21 and 35 years. Having children after 35 can be problematic because the energy is beginning to decline and pregnancy adds to that demand. Late babies can give rise to premature menopausal problems and the mother will take longer to recover from the birth. The age difference can also affect the baby's constitution.'

HORMONE REPLACEMENT

In China, this therapy is just not considered. Says Dr Liu, 'We consider the decrease in hormonal activity, with age, to be normal and natural. If a woman takes care of herself during her menses and/ or pregnancies, she shouldn't experience discomfort with menopause. In a healthy woman, menopause should simply be the cessation of periods.'



Headaches

Women frequently consult Dr Liu about recurrent headaches. 'I work out their ovulation cycle because headaches often occur then. However migraines usually relate to imbalances of the liver meridian.'

Two of the West's favourite beverages, alcohol and coffee, are banned for anyone with menstrual problems or headaches. 'I am very strict about this,'

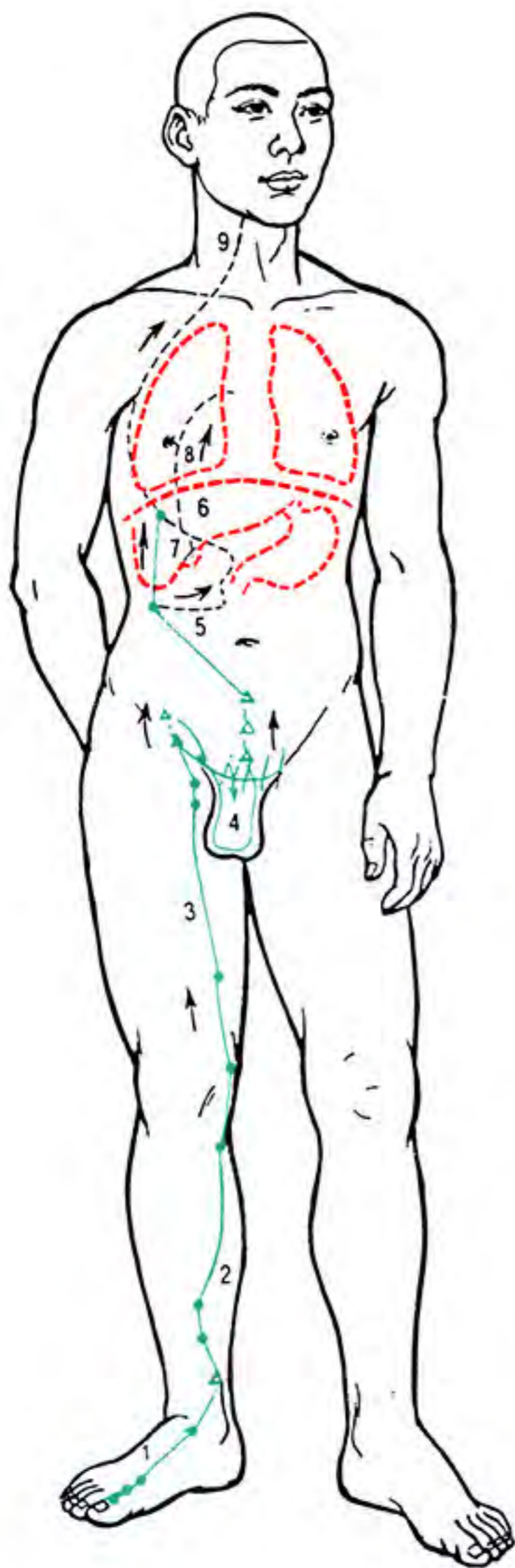


Diagram 1

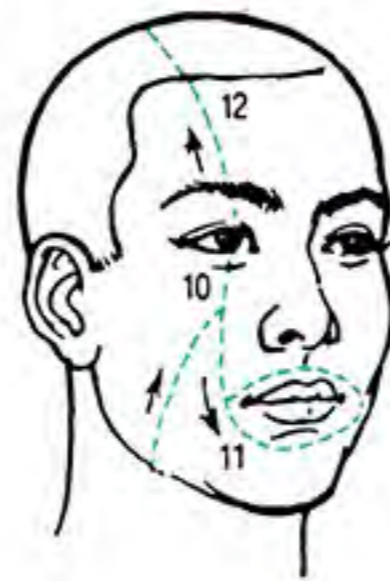
THE LIVER MERIDIAN CAN AFFECT DIFFERENT PARTS OF THE BODY IF ITS ENERGY FLOW BECOMES BLOCKED.

GREEN LINE TRACES SURFACE LIVER MERIDIAN.

RED LINE TRACES DEEP INTERNAL LIVER MERIDIAN.

DOTS INDICATE ACUPUNCTURE POINTS RELATING TO LIVER MERIDIAN.

TRIANGLES DENOTE ACUPUNCTURE POINTS RELATING TO OTHER MERIDIANS WHICH CROSS THE LIVER MERIDIAN.



says Dr Liu. 'In a healthy person a little does no harm, but if patients drink coffee and alcohol while taking Chinese herbs they are wasting my time and their money.'

Alcohol produces a 'damp heat' in the body which, in turn, produces mucus, stagnation and blocked energy. 'Alcohol aggravates the liver and exhausts the kidney energy,' says Liu. 'That's why drinkers are always going to the toilet. The kidney energy becomes so weak the urine can't be stored in the bladder. Chronic conditions arise when both the liver and kidney energies are continually stressed by alcohol.' Kidney energy is thought to be the source of yin and yang, and is known as 'the preserver of life'. Kidney energy controls the reproductive system and also affects the entire body. When it is used up, life ceases. Dr Liu explains that though coffee stimulates liver energy it depresses kidney energy. 'People get a momentary lift from stimulating the liver energy but then irritability sets in as it becomes weakened. This may cause loose bowels during a period.'

Acne

'There is often constipation with skin problems,' says Dr Liu. 'I am surprised people think it's OK to only have one bowel movement every two or three days – that's bad!' Furthermore, Westerners never take much notice of what their bowel movements are like. 'Everything is significant,' stresses Dr Liu. 'Many women come to me with skin problems and are surprised when I ask about their periods and then look at their tongue

and study their pulse. My aim is always to go to the root of any constitutional problem – the skin then clears quite naturally.'

She agrees with the Western view that pimples and acne are due to hormonal changes but adds there's more to it. 'Why should such a normal event result in skin eruptions? And it's not only young people who suffer. Some 30 and 40 year-olds have terrible skin. The problem stems from chronic untreated blood stagnation, tension and stress.'

Food faults

With menstrual problems, what is eaten becomes highly significant. 'Dairy foods and concentrated sweet foods, like chocolate, are detrimental to the spleen energy which controls digestion,' points out Dr Liu. 'Both foods can create mucus throughout the body, blocking the flow of kidney, spleen and liver energies.'

Greasy fried foods, spices, chilies and curry are not on the menu, either. These foods create too much 'heat' which may develop into toxic heat and manifest in hot smelly diarrhoea with flatulence and pimples. Dr Liu recommends women eat more vegetables, rice and soups, especially barley. 'Women tell me they drink lots of iced water and eat only fruit for a day and I am shocked. Drinking fruit juices and eating cold fruits, yoghurts or cold cereals in the morning is unkind to the stomach when it is empty and its energy is weak. Eat something warming like hot cereal, porridge or soup. ♦

