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Traditional Chinese medicine offers drug-free relief from a host of women's health problems including PMT, fatigue and headaches.
By Sue Javes

There's an old Chinese saying that goes, "Extreme emotion leads to 100 illnesses". It appears the Chinese have known for 4000 years what women are just beginning to appreciate! Before our stress-filled lives harm our bodies and drain our energy, more of us are turning to traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) for relief.

If you suffer from constant fatigue, severe pre-menstrual tension, problem skin, migraines, irregular periods or any of a whole host of other all-too-common problems, then chances are you'll benefit from a trip to a TCM practitioner.

"Too much stress is often the culprit," says Lily Jiang Liu, a Sydney-based herbalist who treats many women in her busy inner-city clinic. "Women are always pushing and rushing as they try to meet family and work demands."

Rey Tiquia, a Melbourne acupuncturist and author of *Traditional Chinese Medicine: A Guide to its Practice* (Choice Books, \$16), says stress has a direct bearing on the function of our internal organs. "When you're stressed you feel anger, fear and worry," he says. "Anger affects your liver, fear attacks your kidneys and worry harms your spleen."

According to Peter Townsend of the Chinaherb Company in Sydney, tension blocks the flow of blood. "Men tend to hold stress in the upper body. Neck pain and stiff shoulders are common," he says. "Women are more likely to get lower body problems – PMT, endometriosis and hormone imbalances."

An Holistic Approach

The focus in traditional Chinese medicine is on balance and the flow of energy throughout your body. Life energy or Qi (pronounced chee) travels through

the acupuncture meridians in your body, affecting the vitality of your major organs. Illness is associated with the blockage of energy in one or more of the meridians. Yin and yang are the two extremes of Qi. Yin is primarily a cold, passive, descending energy; yang is hot, vigorous, ascending. The healthy ideal is to maintain a balance between yin and yang.



"IF YOUR SPIRIT IS PRESERVED FROM WITHIN, THEN YOUR BODY'S RESISTANCE TO ILLNESS WILL BE STRONG."

"Western medicine tends to isolate the dysfunctional part of the body, either by removing or fixing it," says Townsend. "The Oriental approach is to treat the patient not the disease. Herbalists look at the constitutional weaknesses of the patient and then use herbs to help create and restore homeostasis in the body."

Is your yin out of sync with your yang? Chinese herbalists believe many

women have a yin deficiency, or too much heat in the body, caused by irregular diet and lifestyle. This can lead to liver stagnation and gynaecological problems.

"The liver is the seat of your emotions," explains Lily Jiang Liu. "When your liver gets stressed, all the energy meridians throughout your body are affected, from your big toe, through the pelvic area, abdomen, chest and up to the throat, eyes and head. Someone might come in complaining of a sore neck, but the underlying problem could be blocked energy to the liver."

It's not just sore heads that can be traced back to meridian sources. "Your liver and kidney meridians control your hormones," says Liu. "Stress on these organs can lead to sore breasts, PMT, mood swings, period pain and other gynaecological problems." In other words, a host of nasties that most of us are all too familiar with.

"Your kidney meridian controls life energy," says Liu. "When your body is stressed, you're low in energy. You become susceptible to colds, flu and cold sores. You need herbs to strengthen your kidneys."

"Constant worry affects your spleen. Poor digestion, fluid retention and weight gain occurs. When your spleen is unhealthy you crave – and eat – sweet, sugary foods, which only puts more stress on your spleen and slows your metabolism. I give patients herbs to clean their system so that their internal organs can perform better."

Liu also specialises in fertility problems. "During their twenties, many women work and party hard. They smoke, eat sugary foods and drink excessive alcohol and coffee to keep them going. Suddenly, in their thirties, they may want to become pregnant, but it doesn't happen. Years of stress and neglect have taken their toll. ▶

What is traditional Chinese medicine?

Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) is a body of medical knowledge that has developed over a period of 4000 years, and is still widely practised in China. It follows a unique method of diagnosing illness and emphasises balance and moderation. TCM includes several therapeutic methods, including herbal medicine, food therapy, acupuncture and tuina (massage).

How to get the most from a visit to a traditional Chinese medicine practitioner:

- Avoid eating food with strong colours, eg lollies and drinks, before your visit, as they will affect your tongue's natural colouring and coating.
- Don't wear make-up or perfume to the consultation. Your facial colour and natural smell need to be accurately noted.
- Don't drink coffee or cola drinks before the visit since caffeine affects the reading of your pulses.
- Be prepared to answer detailed questions about your urine, stool and menstrual flow.
- Check if the practitioner speaks good English. If not, at least make sure an interpreter is available.
- The boiled herbs taste foul, there's no getting around it! If you find them too hard to take or you haven't time to boil them before and after work each day, ask for herbal preparations in a granulated tablet form. It's less individually-tailored but better than giving up on the treatment.
- To find a good practitioner, look for someone with university level qualifications and lengthy clinical experience. Word of mouth is often the best recommendation.

Want to know more?

- For a referral to a TCM practitioner in your area, contact The Australian Traditional Medicine Society, Bank St, Meadowbank, NSW. ☎ (02) 9809 6800
- Lily Jiang Liu, Crown St, Surry Hills, NSW. ☎ (02) 9310 1685
- Peter Townsend, The Whole Health Clinic, George St, Redfern, NSW. ☎ (02) 9698 5555
- Rey Tiquia, Waterbale Rd, Ivanhoe, Vic. ☎ (03) 9499 1362



A herbologist prepares a patient's prescription.

THE BOILED HERBS TASTE FOUL, THERE'S NO GETTING AROUND IT!

"I give women herbs to balance their yin and yang. I also use relaxation herbs to restore energy so that the internal organs can repair themselves and start working for the body."

Your Body Under Scrutiny

According to Rey Tiquia, a good TCM practitioner will take particular care with diagnosing a problem. The patient's signs and symptoms are observed, including facial colour, general spirit, physical build, the colour and structure of the tongue, even body smell. Complexions tinged with shades of green, white, red, black or yellow may indicate illness.

"Your tongue is considered the mirror of the inner organ system," explains Tiquia. "Its coating can indicate how severely a disease has affected the body. The muscular tissue and blood vessels can indicate deficiencies or excesses among the internal organs. For example, a very red tongue suggests there is a kidney

problem. A flabby tongue points to a deficiency in the spleen."

Pulse examination and palpation of various parts of your body are also important diagnostic tools. Feeling your wrist pulse is a way of monitoring the state of the blood and energy channels, and provides information about the health of your internal organs. Six pulses are felt on each wrist, and each pulse is associated with a different internal organ.

"A deep pulse suggests mucus accumulation in your lungs," explains Tiquia. "A wiry pulse indicates hyperactivity of the liver yang."

The information gleaned during the consultation is used to structure a patient's signs and symptoms according to one of 2000 identified clinical patterns. Using this technique, the practitioner can establish the site of the disease, its stage of development, its cause and mechanism. A combination of Chinese herbs, acupuncture, food therapy and massage is then prescribed to address the imbalance in your body.

CASE STUDIES

Chinese herbalist Peter Townsend describes the symptoms – and treatment – of four women who have recently come to his Sydney clinic with common stress-related disorders.

Case: JANE, 33

Symptoms: Irregular periods, PMT, tiredness, period pain, headaches and irritability.

Signs: Facial colour flushed. Tongue redder than normal with yellow coating. Pulses wiry, tight. Abdominal palpation revealed resistance and liver tenderness.

Diagnosis: Hot clinical pattern. Liver Qi stasis – stagnated liver energy.

Treatment: Mixture of herbs including bupleurum and peony root. Acupuncture to activate Qi in the liver meridian. Avoid crustaceans, fatty and spicy food.

Result: Jane's PMT symptoms were reduced by 80 per cent for her next period, and completely gone the following month.

Case: FIONA, 39

Symptoms: Infertility problems, blocked fallopian tubes, painful periods with clotting, cold feet.

Signs: Hot flushed face. Veins under tongue dark and engorged. Pulses rough. Pain when abdomen palpated.

Diagnosis: Clinical pattern of blood stagnation.

Treatment: Herbs to move and invigorate the blood, enhance micro-circulation and stop blood clotting. Reduce red meat and fat intake. Eat Chinese cloud ear mushrooms.

Result: Fiona fell pregnant two months later.

Case: SUE, 29

Symptoms: Fatigue, fluid retention,

painful periods, missed periods and loose bowels.

Signs: Pale complexion. Tongue pale with white coating. Pulse soft and slippery. Abdomen soft and tenderness around the navel.

Diagnosis: Blood deficiency. Spleen deficiency with damp accumulation.

Treatment: Tonifying herbs like dang gui and atractylodes to invigorate the blood and help energy metabolism. Avoid raw and cold foods. Eat vegetable soups with pork and beef bones. Acupuncture to stimulate blood flow.

Result: Sue found most of her symptoms had gone within two months. She was held on a smaller maintenance dose of Chinese herbs for six months to control fluid retention.

Case: PAULA, 42

Symptoms: Tiredness during the day, insomnia at night, mental vagueness, easily bruised, chest palpitations.

Signs: Pale tongue with red tip. Pulse thready.

Diagnosis: Qi and blood deficiency causing unsettled spirit.

Treatment: Combination of sedating herbs such as ginseng, astragalus, dang gui and tonifying herbs like polygala and Chinese sour date seed. Acupuncture for the spleen and heart meridians. Avoid eating late at night.

Result: Paula was sleeping better after one week. Her symptoms cleared after two months.

A deficient pattern requires tonifying herbs, whilst an excess pattern requires sedating ones.

Tiquia stresses that patients have to be pro-active to get the best results from TCM. The administering of herbs, acupuncture and massage is only part of the cure, he says.

“Some patients come with the same mind-set they have when visiting a Western-style GP. They might have hay fever and want a herbal formula for a quick fix. But we take a holistic approach. We will painstakingly collect details about the patient, looking for a pattern of imbalance which fits an established clinical pattern. For optimum success, the patient must also alter her diet and lifestyle.”

Lily Jiang Liu agrees. “I tell them we are a team. I will do this much – clean up your liver and kidneys and restore your energy. In return you will alter your diet, cut out coffee, drink alcohol in moderation and start exercising. It is a major life change, not a three month experiment.”

Tiquia urges us to try to find emotional balance in our lives. “Nurture your spirit by avoiding emotional extremes,” he says. “A full and vibrant spirit helps your body's Qi, blood and organs function normally. If your spirit is preserved from within, then your body's resistance to illness will be strong.”

