

Healthy Aging: Traditional Chinese Medicine Perspective

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Although the risk of disease and disability clearly increase with advancing age, poor health is not an inevitable consequence of aging. Many of the illnesses, disabilities, and deaths associated with chronic diseases are avoidable through known preventive measures.

Key measures include practicing a healthy lifestyle (for example, regular physical activity, healthy eating, and avoiding tobacco use) and the use of early detection practices (for example, screening for breast, cervical, and colorectal cancers, diabetes, and depression).

Throughout the middle and later years, people gradually develop signs and symptoms of aging like graying and thinning of the hair, ringing in the ears, hearing loss, infertility, diminished sexual function, menopause, forgetfulness, urinary and bowel incontinence, pain and weakness in the lower back, hip, and knees, reduced bone density, and increased risk of fractures.

Western medicine recognizes that some of these symptoms may be due to deficiency in sexual hormones such as estrogen and testosterone, which is why hormone replacement has become a focus of “antiaging” medicine.

Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) offers a different perspective that is energy based. From a TCM standpoint, aging is a process of losing kidney qi and essence. Kidney here is not just the anatomic entity of the two kidneys we have in our lower backs but an energy subsystem called the kidney meridian.

Kidney qi and essence, according to the “Yellow Emperor’s Classics,” dating back to about 200 B.C., is responsible for brain development and function, including hearing, bone matrix, and function of bone marrows, sexual function and capacity to conceive, and regulation of the urinary tract and the bowels. This meridian reflects the mental functions of will power and motivation and emotions derived from fear.

Kidney qi and essence is called prenatal because it is inherited from our parents. Therefore, there is a wide range of differences among individuals, and the amount of kidney qi and essence within an individual is limited. The status of kidney qi and essence manifests clearly in our hair.

Menopause in a woman is a hallmark of deficient kidney qi and essence. In addition, kidney qi and essence is the major support for other subsystems causing a wide variety of symptoms.

Other factors can make one lose kidney essence faster. For example, the dysfunction of other meridians can increase the demand and depletion of kidney qi and essence, for example, poor care during pregnancy and childbirth, heavy menstruation, excessive ejaculation in men, and excess of fear.

Meridian status of qi and essence is achieved through classic TCM techniques, such as pulse diagnosis. The primary interventions of TCM to balance meridians include acupuncture, Chinese herbs, and qigong. A brief discussion of a couple cases from our patients is provided to illustrate the TCM approach.

Amy, a 40-year-old woman, reported feeling like she was 90. She had stopped menstruating 10 years ago and lost sexual drive 9 years ago, which is about when she began to suffer from urinary incontinence and osteoporosis. In addition, she had severe seasonal depression and insomnia. She was assessed by classic Chinese medicine techniques and was diagnosed with severe kidney qi deficiency. She was treated with three weekly acupuncture sessions and given Chinese herbal supplements. Her symptoms improved significantly.

Cathy, a 65-year-old woman, complained of difficulty concentrating and memorizing. She attributed these symptoms to side effects from the four medications she was taking to control her severe depression. She was evaluated with TCM techniques and determined to have kidney qi and essence deficiency and liver stagnation.

Twice per week, acupuncture and Chinese herbal remedies were given for a period of three months. In addition to improvement in cognitive function, she reported less low back and knee pain, more sexual satisfaction, reduced urinary incontinence, and better mood. With her physician's guidance, she also was able to decrease her psychotropic medications.

To age healthfully, people need to protect their kidney qi and essence as early as possible. Things that will help include having a healthy lifestyle, such as regular and enough sleep, eating a balanced diet, regular physical activity, having a healthy sex life, and coping with life with less fear.

Foods that are thought to replenish kidney energy, such as grains, dark green leafy vegetables (cooked), black soybeans, black sesame seeds, black mushrooms, walnuts, chestnuts, fish, shrimp, seaweed, lamb, and duck. Herbs thought to support kidney energy are ginseng, Rehmannia root, and lychee nut.

One can learn to stimulate acupuncture points with self-acupressure. Many relaxation techniques and energy exercises can positively affect meridian balance. We particularly recommend mindfulness-based meditation, Tai Chi, and qigong. Chinese medicine-based cultivation systems like Falun Dafa go beyond anti-aging and aim for

spiritual enlightenment and eternal life.

Aging is a natural process of life, and healthy aging is achievable, particularly through integrating that best of Eastern and Western medicine. Therefore, it is advisable that you have a consultation with a well-trained doctor of traditional Chinese medicine to discuss an individual plan that uses ancient Chinese wisdom. However, you should do so in addition to the care you already get from your doctors of conventional medicine.