

Understanding Chinese Herbal Medicine

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Chinese herbal medicine is one of the major clinical healing modalities in the ancient Chinese medical system. It is not as well-known as acupuncture, possibly due to its complexity and lack of immediate effects compared to acupuncture, which can reduce pain quickly.

Chinese herbal medicine is not quite an accurate description of this modality because it employs herbs or plants, minerals, insects (silkworm skin, for example), sea creatures (oyster shells), and animal products such as tiger bones.

People who seek help from a practitioner of Chinese herbal medicine are very often confused by what medicines might do to them, how they work, and how they are prepared.

One of the common misperceptions of Chinese herbal medicines is that they are chemical agents like other medications or vitamins. Indeed, there are a lot of chemical agents in each of the individual herbs. Sometimes, they contain extracts, which are particular chemical components that are made into medicines.

For example, malaria can be treated with extracts from Qinggao (*Artemisia apiacea*). However, in the pure practice of Chinese herbal medicine, the ingredients are not chosen based on their chemical components, but on the energy output of the whole ingredient.

For example, a commonly used Chinese herb Huangqi (*Astragalus*) is somewhat sweet, mildly warming, and has an affinity for the lung, spleen, and kidney meridians. Because spleen “qi” is the major energy for food absorption, metabolism, and immunity, Huangqi is effective for mal-absorption, slow metabolism, and prolapsed organs, for modulating immunity and preventing infections from bacteria and viruses. Kidney qi regulates urination; therefore, Huangqi is also effective for urinary dysfunction caused by an enlarged prostate. For treating different kinds of illness such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, stroke, and the side effects of chemotherapy or radiation therapy, it is often used in combination with other herbal ingredients.

People often think they can take the same Chinese herbal remedy forever as they take other food and nutritional supplements. The body’s energy status changes as result of herbal medicine treatment, so the ingredients and their dosages need to be modified

every one or two weeks or periodically, depending on the individual's situation.

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It is essential for anyone who wants to benefit from Chinese herbal medicine to consult a doctor of Chinese medicine for evaluation based on the theories and diagnostic techniques of Chinese medicine, including pulse and tongue reading.

When evaluating a patient, the Chinese medicine practitioner first has to identify which meridians and organ systems are out of balance. For example, liver and stomach meridians are often affected in indigestion. The practitioner has to determine the nature of the energy imbalance, such as too much or too little energy or energy that is stagnated, blocked, or moving in the wrong direction.

Taking esophageal reflux as example, it may be stagnated liver energy affecting the normal flow of stomach energy, which is now moving in the wrong direction. If it has been a chronic condition, the patient can get very tired and malnourished.

Emotional distress, anger, and especially resentment often cause liver energy stagnation. Patients with this type of imbalance may also suffer from migraine, depression, insomnia, irritable bowel, and chronic pain in deep tissues.

When the Chinese medicine doctor has gathered all the information and comes up with diagnoses of energy imbalance, an individualized Chinese medicine remedy is formulated.

In most cases, four types of herbs are included in the formula. The first is called emperor. The emperor represents the herbs that treat the main symptoms and their underlying causes.

The second is called minister. The minister helps the emperor to do a better job and also treats accompanying symptoms and their underlying causes.

The third is called assistant. The assistant is the herb that helps both emperor and minister but also harmonizes the formula and eliminates possible toxins and side effects.

The fourth is called ambassador. The ambassador is the herb that makes sure the formula will reach the targeted organs and meridians. Each type may consist of more than one herb.

Traditionally, the patient will make a decoction from the formula made of raw herbs, following specific instructions and procedures, and drink the decoction twice a day, usually without food. Formulations can also be made into capsules using concentrated extracts of herbs.

Patients are often advised not to eat cold, raw, spicy, or hot, spicy food.

Traditionally, acupuncture is often given daily, but it is used much less frequently in the United States. In treating complicated and chronic medical conditions and in treating patients who are very deficient in energy, the addition of Chinese herbal medicine to acupuncture can be invaluable.