



Healthy Aging:

Traditional Chinese Medicine Perspectives

By Jingdian Yang, M.D.

The United States is on the brink of a longevity revolution. By 2030, the number of older Americans will have more than doubled to 70 million, or one in every five Americans. Although the risk of disease and disability clearly increases with advancing age, poor health is not an inevitable consequence of aging. Much of the illness, disability, and death associated with chronic diseases are avoidable through known prevention measures. Key measures include practicing a healthy lifestyle (e.g., regular physical activity, healthy eating, and avoiding tobacco use) and the use of early detection practices (e.g., screening for breast, cervical, and colorectal cancers, diabetes and its complications, and depression).

Throughout the middle and later years, people gradually develop signs and symptoms of aging like graying and thinning of hair, ringing in the ears and/or hearing loss, infertility, diminish sexual function, menopause, forgetfulness, urinary and bowel incontinence, pain and weakness in the lower back, hip, and knees (weight bearing bones), reduced bone densities 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 "anti-aging" medicine.

Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) offers a different perspective that is energetically 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 back, but an energetic subsystem called Kidney meridian. Kidney qi and essence, according to Yellow Emperor's Classics, which dates 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 urinary tract and 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 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 manifest 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 subsystem of our body. When Kidney qi/essence is deficient, it affects other energetic subsystems, causing a wide variety of symptoms.

There are other factors that 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, such as poor care during pregnancy and child birth, heavy menstruation, excessive ejaculation in men, and excess of the emotion 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 practice is provided to illustrate the TCM approach.

Amy was a 40 year old woman who reported feeling like she was 90. She stopped menstruating 10 years ago, lost sexual drive 9 years ago, which is about when she began to suffer from urinary incontinence, and



early osteoporosis. In addition, she had severe seasonal depression and insomnia. She was assessed with classic Chinese medicine techniques and was diagnosed with severe Kidney qi deficiency. She was treated with three months of twice weekly acupuncture and given

Chinese herbal supplements. Overall, her symptoms improved significantly.

Cathy was a 65 year old woman who complained of difficulty concentrating and memorizing. She attributed these symptoms as being 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, as well as Liver qi stagnation. Twice per week acupuncture with Chinese herbal remedies was given for a period of three months. In addition to improvement with her cognitive function, she reported less low back/knee pain, more sexual satisfaction, reduced urinary incontinence, and better mood. With the guidance of her physician, she also was able to decrease her psychotropic medications.

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

There are foods that are thought to replenish kidney energy, such as grain, wheat, deep green leafy vegetables (cooked), black soy bean, black sesame seeds, black mushrooms, walnuts, chestnuts, fish, shrimp, seaweed, lamb, duck, etc. There are herbs that are thought to support kidney energy, such as ginseng, Rehmannia root, leech berry, etc. There are acupuncture points that one can learn to stimulate with self acupressure. There are many relaxation techniques and energy exercises that can positively affect meridian balance. We particularly recommend mindfulness-based meditation, Tai Chi and Qi Gong. There are Chinese medicine-based cultivation systems like Falun Dafa that go beyond anti-aging and aim for spiritual enlightenment and energetic eternity.

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

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