



Women's Health: An Ancient Chinese Medicine Perspective

By Jingduan Yang, M.D.

There are a group of clinical conditions that commonly affect women. They include migraine, depression, insomnia, irritable bowel syndrome, fibromyalgia, PMS and chronic fatigue. From a conventional biomedical perspective, clinical research and experience have shown that often the same medications help several of the conditions listed above. For example, the medication category of SSRI (serotonin specific reuptake inhibitor), which includes drugs like Prozac, Zoloft, Lexapro, etc., is sometimes used as a first line treatment in conventional medicine for all of these illnesses.

There is also a common thread among these illnesses when they are examined from the perspective of ancient Chinese medicine. In this paradigm, such conditions very often have a similar energetic imbalance involving the wood element, which manifests in the liver-gallbladder meridians, one of the many energetic networks in the human body.

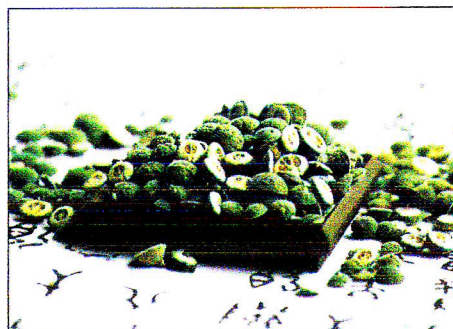
At the energetic or chi level, liver regulates digestion. Stagnated liver energy can cause esophageal reflux, bloating, and alternating diarrhea and constipation.

The liver meridian extends to the eyes, affecting vision, and its functional partner, the gallbladder meridian, extends around the temporal area of the head. Hence, when liver-gallbladder energy is imbalanced, it can cause visual disturbances and a temporal headache, like migraine.

Liver energy nourishes sinews, ligaments and the fascias of human body. It is also in charge of the free flow of energy throughout the whole body. When liver energy is deficient or stagnated, pain occurs all over the body, particularly in the ligamentous areas of joints. Classic tenets of ancient Chinese medicine state that wherever there is energy blockage or energy deficiency, there is also pain. If you examine the trigger points of pain with fibromyalgia, there is often an overlap with liver-gallbladder acupuncture points.

Liver energy regulates menstruation, and its meridians go through the breast, stomach and uterus. When liver energy is disturbed, irregular periods, cramps with breast tenderness, and indigestion will occur. Qi stagnation can cause blood stagnation; dark clots are often observed with menstrual flows. If the conditions persist for a long time, uterine and/or breast fibroids may develop.

According to ancient Chinese medicine, liver energy regulates blood



storage and houses the ethereal soul. Sufficient blood regulation by liver energy is crucial for having a peaceful mind and a restful sleep at night, as well as having good vision and alertness during the day. The peak time of liver energy is between 1-3 in the morning. A disturbed sleep during this time often indicates liver energy problems.

As mentioned above, liver is a function of the wood element, which has a regulatory effect on digestion. The earth element also has a direct effect on digestion, as manifested by the stomach and spleen meridians. The earth element's effect on digestion relates primarily to the absorption and assimilation of food and nutrients. When there is excessive liver (wood) energy, it can override earth. Consequently, energy from food and nutrition can be affected, resulting in fatigue and a slow metabolism. So, although it may initially appear as if the problem is a primary earth deficiency, it may really be a wood excess.

When we examine human beings at the energetic level, it is impossible to separate mental and physical function, or mind and body. Physical dysfunction will disturb emotional and mental status, and vice versa.

In ancient Chinese medicine, liver energy is affected primarily by the emotion of anger and its related emotions, such as irritability, frustration, rage, jealousy, depression and disappointment. Therefore, it is important to be mindful of your emotional status and the psychosocial aspects of your life. If you have a prolonged problem with one of the conditions listed above, you may want to consider exploring unresolved anger with a mental health professional as part of your overall treatment plan. Daily meditation and qigong cultivation can also be of tremendous benefit.

For the heat that liver stagnation might cause, you may want to avoid spicy foods that create additional heat in your body, such as hot peppers. Green-colored food is normally good for liver energy.

As mentioned, liver energy has its peak time at 1-3 am. Therefore you really want to have good sleep during this time. Staying up late might trigger or aggravate migraine headaches and other problems associated with a liver imbalance. If you wake up frequently during this period of time, consider the possibility of a life situation whose emotions affect your liver energy balance.

Positive emotions that nourish liver are compassion, kindness, benevolence and generosity. Any practice that helps to cultivate these positive attributes should be very helpful.

Acupuncture and Chinese herbal remedies are the modalities that enable trained health professionals to manipulate and balance energy status. They can be very helpful when the appropriate evaluation is made, correct points are chosen, and proper techniques are used.

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