

# *Chinese Medicine for Menopause*

*Kate Kent discusses vitamins and Chinese herbs to alleviate discomfort*

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Traditional Chinese Medicine or TCM (acupuncture and Chinese herbal remedies) is a safe, painless and effective way to treat menopausal discomfort. It is an ancient and preventive form of medicine which deals with the patient as a whole. In order to understand this modality, it is necessary to put aside our Western way of seeing how the body functions and follow instead an intricate map of how the Chinese viewed the body five thousand years ago.



## **CHINESE VIEW OF THE BODY**

In ancient China, the body was considered sacred and operations were actually against the law. Even if they had been able to see the inner workings, as doctors can today, they wouldn't have had our advanced technology and sophisticated instruments. Because of this, they developed acute skills for observing the outside of the body during different ages and seasons, and formed the intricate energetic system and theory that is still used by practitioners today.

This system includes the same organs but with different functions, energy, known as Qi, Blood, Yin and Yang, Body Fluids and Jing, or Vital Essence. Yin and Yang are polar opposites, like hot and cold, light and dark, etc., and each organ has a component of each. Jing is supportive and nutritive and is the basis of reproduction and development.

As the body ages, Jing starts to diminish and can cause the imbalances we know as menopausal disorders. In women the physical manifestation of Jing is (menstrual) Blood. There is Prenatal Jing which is inherited from the parents, and Postnatal (or acquired) Jing which is provided by the food and air taken in after birth. Surplus Jing is stored in the Kidneys for use in an emergency. Healthy food and good digestion produce plenty of Qi and Blood. The surplus blood in women overflows every 28 days in menstruation. Around the late 30s digestion slows down, which means less production of Qi and Blood, and so less Postnatal Jing to supplement the Prenatal Jing, which begins to diminish.

In TCM theory, menopause is brought about to slow down the loss of Prenatal Jing. The body goes through a hormonal change that gradually slows and then stops the menstrual cycle to protect what is left of the precious blood. This is a natural process not a disease. However, some imbalances can occur. Each organ functions symbiotically with the other organs and an imbalance of the Qi or Blood can disrupt the flow.

Following are examples of some very common menopausal disorders as they relate to TCM.

If the Kidney Yin (blood, coolness) becomes Deficient, the Yang (heat) is going to rise out of control and disrupt the Liver Yang as well which is likely to cause hot flashes, headaches, constipation, insomnia and thirst, all very common complaints during menopause. On the other hand, if the Kidney and Spleen Yang are Deficient, Cold and Dampness can accumulate in the body causing loss of appetite, obesity, abdominal distention edema, lower back pain and fear of cold. An Excess of Yang in the Liver (different from the

Deficient Yin syndrome above) can cause dizziness and vertigo, irritability, excessive menstrual flow, hot flashes, sweating, migraine and psoriasis (caused by the heat rising to the head). If the Yang of the Heart is Deficient, problems such as palpitations, night sweats, heat in the palms of the hands and soles of the feet, and restlessness can occur. All of these symptoms can be successfully treated with herbs and acupuncture.

### **ACUPUNCTURE AND HERBS**

Acupuncture consists of inserting tiny, disposable, needles into specific acupuncture points along the meridians, which are the pathways of Qi. Gentle manipulation of these needles affects the flow of Qi and can correct existing disharmony. The needles cause a mild sensation of numbness, swelling, heat or local ache, as well as a general feeling of relaxation.

There are more than two thousand medicinal botanicals derived from minerals, and the bark, roots, leaves and flowers of plants. There are tonics to build Yin, Yang and Blood; herbs to clear heat and fever and moisten dryness; and herbs to clear dampness and to strengthen Qi. They come loose, ready for decoction or on pill form.

### **CASE HISTORY**

A patient came to see me complaining of a rash she'd had for two years around the mouth area. This rash had developed prior to menopause. She'd been put on cortisone and told it was hormonal and that nothing could be done. Her tongue and pulse indicated Excess Heat rising to the head and, in this case, a patent herb very quickly cleared the heat, the rash disappeared and she felt better generally.

Magic? Not at all. Did it just mask the problem? Absolutely not.

In TCM theory, the Liver is responsible for the free flow of Qi in the body. When this Qi becomes blocked for whatever reason, it can cause lots of heat to rise to the head with accompanying irritability, insomnia, restlessness and, in this case, a rash around the mouth. The herbs I prescribed purged Excess Heat from her Liver and Gallbladder and allowed the Liver Qi to flow smoothly again, hence relieving the underlying problem.

### **THE ROLE OF VITAMINS ACCORDING TO TCM THEORY**

Vitamins play a major role in easing menopausal symptoms. Vitamins A, E, B2, Biotin, Choline, Folic Acid, Inositol, and PABA tonify the Blood; vitamins B3, B5, B6 and C, Bioflavonoids and Beta-carotene clear Excess Heat; vitamins D and E tonify the Kidneys and benefit the Jing; vitamins B5 and C help hot flashes and sweating; and Calcium to strengthen bones. Elemental calcium is the crucial one, best taken at night because the bones are able to absorb it better while you sleep. Fatty fish and eggs enhance calcium absorption.

An excellent source for Qi and Blood production, both important for women during this period of their lives, can be obtained from soups made from meat broth or marrow bones. These supply nutrients without the difficult to digest part of the meat. Add one tablespoon of wine vinegar to soup with bones to leach out the calcium. Another source of nutrients comes from sea vegetables such as dulse, nori, kelp, kombu, wakame and hiziki. All of them contain high quantities of calcium, iron, phosphorus, potassium, manganese, sodium, zinc and iodine, as well as vitamins A, C and the B complex, including B12. They are beneficial to the hair, nails, bones and teeth and also help to reduce cholesterol.

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