

The Treatment of Fibromyalgia with Traditional Chinese Medicine

By Kate Kent, Dip. Ac., C.H. (NCCAOM)

If you've never had or even heard of fibromyalgia consider yourself very lucky!

Fibromyalgia Syndrome (FMS) is a nasty pernicious, predominately female, disease that targets women 20 to 50 years old. It causes a lot of suffering and, until recently, was often ignored and misunderstood by mainstream medicine. The problem for anyone suffering from it is that FMS is the umbrella under which lie many patterns which are serious enough in their own right so it is easy to miss the whole picture. It is not a rheumatic, inflammatory, progressive or degenerative disease.

The definition and diagnosis of FMS is that it is a chronic condition which means it has been in existence for at least three months. Anywhere from 90 to 100% of FMS sufferers have generalized body pain, fatigue and muscular stiffness which are worse in the morning and after exercise. Patients often describe the pain as deep, burning, throbbing, shooting or stabbing with 11 out of 18 tender spots. As much as 75% of cases also report suffering from chronic fatigue. These symptoms can be accompanied by additional problems such as poor sleep, headaches, numbness or tingling, difficulty thinking or concentrating, dizziness, sensitivity to light or noise as well as painful menstruation. About 50-70% of FMS sufferers also have irritable bowel syndrome, blurred vision, depression or mood swings, palpitations, cold extremities and allergies, especially to chemicals. There can also be restless leg syndrome, itchy skin, poor hearing, asthma, bladder irritation and TMJ pain.

While I have never seen all the above symptoms in one person, I have certainly seen several of these symptoms bunched together. In terms of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), disease mechanisms the signs and symptoms of FMS are primarily due to a dysfunction of the liver and spleen.

The liver overacting on a weak spleen can be a major cause of many symptoms of FMS because the liver is also responsible for the smooth flow of Qi around the body. The liver reacts strongly to emotions such as anger, frustration and resentment and this reaction impedes the flow of Qi and it gets blocked and can overflow into the spleen upsetting the spleen's function of making blood resulting in blood deficiency. The spleen's job of making blood can also be impaired by poor eating habits (eating on the run, eating deep fried food, or raw vegetables and salads, or eating while angry, etc.), excessive thinking and stress, prolonged exposure to dampness and chronic disease. This condition has a direct impact on the severity and prolonged existence of an attack of FMS. Another cause for blood deficiency is that as women age their blood production declines as their childbearing years end. As natural as this process may be some people experience moderate to severe problems, while others sail right through it. A weak spleen is going to produce a lot of dampness. Think of it like a sponge soaking up nutrients and squeezing them out and around the body. If the spleen is weak, the sponge doesn't have the energy to "squeeze" and it becomes waterlogged. This dampness can cause a feeling of heaviness, aches and pains, headaches, poor appetite, disrupted bowel function, fatigue, poor memory, fuzzy thinking and depression.



Damp Heat

Spleen dampness, over time, will turn to damp-heat causing the same problems as regular dampness but with a feeling of heat and discomfort, often accompanied by skin problems.

Blood Stasis

A Statement of Fact in TCM theory says, “If there is free flow, there is no pain. If there is pain, there is no free flow”. The liver stores and releases the blood. The qi and blood move together and if one is stuck or deficient it will affect the other resulting in pain just about anywhere in the body as witnessed in fibromyalgia.

Treatment

The first step is a complete assessment which includes questioning, examining the tongue and pulse and going over nutrition. In TCM we always treat the patterns that present themselves, with fibromyalgia there may well be three to 10 patterns that present simultaneously, and we treat them in order of predominance. We choose an herbal formula in the same way, a formula for the first set of patterns which can be modified to treat any remaining patterns. Decoctions may include Xiao Yao San or Xiao Chai Hu Tang if there is a liver/spleen disharmony; or Bana Xia Xie Xin Tang if there is damp-heat.

FMS causes so much discomfort and suffering that I always make sleep deprivation my first priority for a successful outcome. Lack of sleep not only slows the body’s ability to heal but can be a cause of further anxiety. Depending on what sleep pattern it is I might choose Tian Wang Bu Xin Dan which nourishes the heart and calms the spirit. Acupuncture works on the same premise as herbs. A prescription of points would be chosen according to the pattern that is presented. Adequate exercise is necessary but it is important to listen to one’s body because too much can cause a post exercise malaise. To start with it’s a bit of trial and error until the body indicates what is appropriate. The amount and kind of exercise may vary according to symptoms. Exercise moves the blood, helps strengthen the spleen and pushes excess heat out of the body. Relaxation is just as important in order for the body to renew and heal and both exercise and relaxation help with depression. And, of course, diet is of utmost importance – a bland diet – to strengthen the spleen and dry dampness

It is important to remember that, if you are unlucky enough to experience FMS, there is always hope!

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