

Traditional Chinese Medicine
For Stiff and Aching Joints

By Kate Kent, R.Ac., R.TCMP, Dipl. Ac., C.H. (NCCAOM)

With the baby boomer generation heading into its late 60s many of us feel some joint stiffness when we get up from a sitting position, or first thing in the morning. Big business certainly knows about us. All you have to do is look at the shelves of a pharmacy to see the myriad pain relieving medications available. Why has this happened to us and how best can we help ourselves? A lifetime of exposure to the elements, excessive exercise, a weaker immune system than when we were young can all contribute to pain as we age. Looking at myths and realities, my answers come from Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM).

I remember as a child in England being told not to sit on the damp grass because I would get arthritis, or on the radiators in the classroom at school because I would get piles. I think the radiator threat was a bit steep because they were the only source of heat on bitterly cold days! It can be so cold and damp in England and I remember we were prone to chilblains – a medical condition that is often confused with frostbite.

As it turns out those instructions were spot on. TCM theory holds that the elements like wind, cold, damp, and heat can invade any channel disrupting the flow of qi (energy) and resulting in stiffness and pain of the joints (painful obstruction syndrome, also known as Bi syndrome, meaning blockage). Any joint can be affected, especially the hands, arms, shoulders, feet, knees, and lower back.

Wind and the Flow of Qi

In a healthy person the qi moves freely through the body like a car travelling along a highway. However, on a highway when there is an accident, the flow of traffic slows and stops resulting in a traffic jam. A network of channels carry qi through the body but, if a pathogen like damp or cold gets into a channel it blocks the flow of qi, especially as it manoeuvres around a joint, causing swelling and pain. These pathogenic factors invade the body from the exterior via the mouth, nose or body surface causing diseases. In TCM the belief is that environmental wind can enter the channels from the outside. For example, if you take a walk on a cold, windy day, without properly covering your neck, you will most likely get a headache or earache from the wind. A “statement of fact” in TCM states “wind is the chief of the one hundred diseases”. Wind is often the vehicle that carries the climatic factors into the body and wind causes havoc. It literally adopts the characteristics of wind, moving the pain from joint to joint. The characteristics of wind are sudden onset, movement from place to place and, in some cases, paralysis. If there is accompanying dampness, the joints will become swollen and will feel heavy with a dull ache. If there is dampness and heat, the joints will swell and feel heavy and hot. Invasion of cold is perhaps the most painful because cold contracts and the pain can be

quite excruciating. These exterior pathogens can enter the body after swimming, working in a damp environment, wearing damp clothes, sitting on the damp ground or walking in cold wind without appropriate protection.

Bell's Palsy, in TCM theory, is exterior wind-cold attacking the channels of the face disrupting the flow of qi and blood in the channel. The symptoms can be pain, paralysis, numbness and difficulty in closing the eyes, difficulty eating or smiling. The onset is sudden (one of the characteristics of wind) and is often feared to be a stroke. When I studied in China, I saw a lot of these cases in the hospital. Patients would come in after riding their bikes to work in the bitter wind and cold. Bus and cab drivers who drive with their window open are prone to Bell's Palsy because the wind attacks the face.

A person with a strong constitution is less likely to suffer from joint discomfort, whereas someone with a weakened immune system may not have strong enough qi to protect the body from external pathogens. In TCM there are various kinds of qi, one being defensive qi. The job of the defensive qi is to control the opening and closing of the pores, and to defend the body against exogenous etiological factors. People with weak defensive qi need to take extra care to eat well, wrap up on cold days, and get plenty of rest.

The Role of Diet

Painful joints may also come from internal causes. One of the most important things we can do to help ourselves is ensure we have a healthy diet. Many books advocate this or that theory of what they consider good for all of us, but Chinese medicine suggests that each person's diet should vary according to their needs. The general idea is that anyone with a weak digestion, with gas, bloating, constipation or diarrhoea and a feeling of cold, should avoid raw vegetables, salads, cold drinks and too much fruit. Raw foods certainly have more enzymes but a poor digestion is unlikely to absorb these enzymes. The concept of the spleen in TCM is that it absorbs nutrients like a sponge and sends these nutrients around the body. The spleen and stomach work synergistically, with the spleen energy moving up and the stomach energy moving down like passing elevators. If one gets stuck, the other gets stuck. If the spleen is weakened by poor diet, it loses its ability to absorb nutrients and instead becomes waterlogged and soggy, creating damp. This in turn obstructs the stomach energy from moving down and it goes up instead, causing hiccupping, burping, and a stuck feeling. If a person already has excess yang in the body (yang energy is hot as apposed to yin energy that is cold), this damp will quickly turn hot and will become damp-heat. Damp-heat is similar to a bog with the hot sun beating down on it. Eventually it begins to steam.

Gout and Diet

One of the most painful diseases caused by wind, damp, and heat is gout. This can be directly attributed to poor diet as well as external influences. Gout causes sudden and severe pain and tenderness in the affected joint, most often the big toe. In Chinese medicine it is known as *tong feng* or painful wind. Rheumatoid Arthritis, usually

manifesting as inflammation of several joints can be a severe impediment of the flow to the joints that causes the joints to swell and bones to become deformed.

The practitioner needs to determine whether the patient has an organ or channel syndrome. For example, pain in the face, shoulder, wrist, or knee, is more likely to be a channel problem and then it's a matter of locating the right channel to treat. Pain in the low back and knees could indicate a kidney problem and then the kidney needs to be treated. The tongue and pulse, as I've written before, open up the book of the body to the practitioner. They will show what kind of syndrome the patient has and where the problem lies.

Treating the Root and the Branch

The main thrust of any treatment is to dispel what is causing the problem and to get the qi moving. For example, if there is damp, the spleen needs to be treated, if there is exterior wind, it needs to be expelled, and if there is cold, the body needs to be warmed to dispel the cold. Needles manipulated in acupuncture points along the channel help to direct the qi in the direction it needs to go. Like a traffic cop directing traffic! Wind is a cause of so many diseases that there are perhaps more wind points than just about any other kind. The practitioner may also use cupping (glass cups are heated and applied to the body – very good for warming and expelling wind), or moxibustion, made from mugwort leaves (*Artemisia Vulgaris*), which treats and prevents diseases by applying its heat to points or certain locations on the body and, of course, herbs. We have literally hundreds of herb combinations that can be combined to treat the root as well as the branch of the disease.

For home use, if you feel very cold, slice up some fresh ginger root, boil it for a few minutes and drink the mixture throughout the day. Eat warm or even hot spicy food if your stomach can handle it and drink warm drinks. First thing in the morning try hot water with a few drops of fresh lemon juice and a couple of shakes of turmeric, which is good for inflammation.

TCM Guidelines for Diet – ‘Resolving Damp’ Foods

Resolving Damp Foods

Fruits should be eaten sparingly and not first thing in the morning

Vegetables: celery, pumpkin, scallion, alfalfa, leafy greens, turnip, kohlrabi, asparagus, mushrooms, bok choy, broccoli, cauliflower, cabbage, snow peas, turnip.

In smaller quantities: millet, rye, oats, barley, quinoa, corn, basmati/wild rice

Meat: chicken

Fish/Seafood: various fish (not fatty)

Dairy: *small quantities* goat's milk/cheese, rice milk, egg whites

Seeds & nuts: pumpkin, almonds, walnuts, sunflower seeds

Oils/condiments: olive, flaxseed, raw honey, stevia, almond butter

Damp-Cold: sage, paprika, turmeric, garlic, pepper, ginger, cinnamon, thyme, cardamom, fennel, cumin, caraway, rosemary, basil.

Damp-Heat: nettle, licorice, mint/peppermint, lime/lemon

Damp-Cold/Heat: green tea

Damp-Cold: ginger and jasmine tea

Damp-Heat: mint/peppermint tea, lemon balm/lime, pear juice

Sugar Cravings

It is important whether you have damp-cold or damp-heat to start the day with a warm cooked breakfast and to avoid raw vegetables and salads as they are hard to digest. This helps to strengthen the spleen to reduce dampness. It is common for people who suffer with a weak spleen to have quite strong sugar cravings. Of course, if you indulge in sugar you make the spleen weaker and, besides, it's not the kind of sugar that your spleen is asking for. The color associated with the spleen is yellow, so incorporating yellow vegetables like carrots, squash and sweet potatoes will help the craving. Carrot ginger soup will be a treat for your stomach. In the short term, if the craving for sugar is intense, eat a **teaspoon** of hard honey (you can get more on a teaspoon than the runny kind). Sip on a hot drink and slowly suck on the honey like a sweet. You'll be amazed how it helps. Also have protein with every meal like chicken, fish, beans, lentils, peas, or soy and don't drink with food. If you feel hot and have hot, swollen joints still eat warm cooked foods but stay away from the hot, pungent spices, alcohol, greasy foods and sugar! Try instead to have foods that strengthen the yin and have a cooling effect like peppermint tea, aduki beans, potatoes, avocados, tofu or kidney beans.

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