

HEALTH

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TCM

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On the boil

Flexibility is one of the main reasons herbal decoctions have remained the clinical mainstay of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) for thousands of years. They're therapeutic, quickly absorbed and have few toxic side effects, and the ingredients can be modified on a daily basis, allowing physicians to cater to the patient's changing needs.

It's important to follow a step-by-step process to ensure the decoctions work effectively. A ceramic clay or crockery pot with a lid works best. But an enamel or glass pot can also be used. Iron, aluminium and copper pots should be avoided because these materials may affect the ingredients.

Add cool water until the herbs are lightly submerged. Physicians may recommend rice wine or a combination of water and wine for certain decoctions. Soak for 20-30 minutes so the contents can be extracted when boiled. Bring to the boil quickly and turn the heat down as required.

The specific time and heat are determined by the properties and nature of the ingredients. Generally, cold and flu or purgative decoctions are boiled rapidly for 20-30 minutes. Tonic or other decoctions that contain rich, cloying substances are cooked for longer (about one hour) on a low heat and with more water.

The herbal compounds and the liquid are commonly boiled

down to about 250ml. Then it should be filtered into a container. If the decocted herbal ingredients are overheated or singed, the whole decoction should be discarded because damaged ingredients can produce undesirable effects.

Sometimes the same set of ingredients can be boiled twice. When decocting for a second time, less water (about 500ml) is used. The two liquids created from the procedures are then mixed together, and drunk in the morning and evening.

Some ingredients must be treated differently. If they're in your prescription, the ingredients are usually packed separately. For example, shells and minerals have to be smashed and decocted first; peppermint and costus root are added near the end and are cooked for five minutes only; substances such as red halloysite and yellow starwort must be wrapped in gauze, because they make the decoction turbid or can irritate the throat; and expensive substances such as deer horn and ginseng are sliced and boiled separately, so their active ingredients aren't affected by other herbs.

Various other ingredients such as honey or malt sugar should be added directly to the warm finished decoction, and some rare aromatic substances such as musk are ground into powder and taken with a decoction or lukewarm water.

If preparing your own decoction seems daunting, many herbal shops and physicians can provide them.

Please consult your medical or TCM practitioner before taking any medicine