

HEALTH

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TCM

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Bare essentials

Someone not familiar with traditional Chinese medicine might be surprised by the lack of equipment in a TCM practitioner's office.

Stethoscopes, urine test strips, X-ray screens, lab tests or even thermometers aren't traditionally used by TCM practitioners – although more are incorporating western diagnostic data into their patient-assessment procedures.

In general, a TCM practitioner makes a diagnosis based on sensory perceptions. Pathological changes in the body are reflected externally as emotions, the state of the tongue or abnormalities in the complexion or pulse. A TCM practitioner uses a variety of methods to obtain information, such as questioning, inspection, listening, smelling and taking pulse readings to form a diagnosis. A few important points need to be explained about the examination process.

During the history-gathering phase, some questions may seem irrelevant to the problem. Probing about chills and fevers, perspiration, appetite and taste, stool conditions and urination, pain and sleep are normal.

Women are likely to be asked about their menses and their obstetric history.

The inspection covers changes in a person's vitality, complexion, physical condition and behaviour. Skin colour is important. The lustre of the skin reflects the prosperity or decline of the *chi* (vital energy) and essence.

In TCM, skin is divided into five colours corresponding to the organs: green is for the liver; red for the heart; yellow for the spleen; white for the lungs; and

black for the kidneys. Changes in skin colour are said to reflect the nature of a disease and various syndromes of different organs.

Tongue diagnosis is also a unique part of a TCM examination, because different parts of the tongue are said to correspond to certain internal organs: the tip of the tongue reflects the heart and lungs; the middle, the spleen and stomach; its root, the kidneys; and both sides of the tongue, the liver and gall-bladder.

A normal tongue is one that's the correct size, has a soft texture, moves freely, is pale red and has a thin white coating that's neither dry nor too moist.

Pulse examination is, perhaps, the most important aspect of the whole TCM examination process and another unique feature.

The pulse is considered to be governed by the heart and commanded by *chi*.

Whatever the causes of the disease, abnormalities can be detected in the pulse. Differentiating the many types of pulses takes a lot of practice.

When choosing a TCM practitioner in Hong Kong, it's vital to keep a few things in mind.

All qualified TCM practitioners must have a licence issued by the Hong Kong Chinese Medicine Board.

Ask a TCM practitioner how much experience they have and where they've trained.

It's important not only to ask how many years they've practised, but also how many patients they've treated with a particular problem.

There are two Chinese medicine associations in Hong Kong that can direct people to a TCM practitioner: the Hong Kong Association of Traditional Chinese Medicine (www.chinesemedicinehka.com) and the Hong Kong Registered Chinese Medicine Physician Association (www.hkrcmp.org). Both websites are in Chinese.