

HEALTH

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TCM

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The key to chi

In traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), all forms of life are regarded as being animated by an essential life force or vital energy called *chi*.

Human *chi* is either inherited from parents or derived from substances in nature such as air, food and water.

But *chi* has various definitions in Chinese culture: it may refer to a gas, a particular property, function or even the weather.

For example, evil *chi* – also referred to as exogenous evils –

are outside influences that invade the body and cause disease. Normal body *chi*, which promotes health and prolongs life, is the other extreme of the many kinds of energy.

It's difficult to find a word or phrase that completely describes the nature of *chi*. Most often, it's best defined according to its functions and properties.

Chi circulates through the organs, muscles, skin and meridians, providing the power source for vital activities. Meridians are the pathways along which *chi* flows. Acupuncture uses points along these pathways to unblock clogged *chi* flow.

In a gaseous state, air contains more kinetic heat energy than in its liquid state. Like air, *chi* also contains heat energy for the

body. Being a heat source, *chi* warms the body and keeps it at a constant temperature so normal physiological functions can take place. A *chi* deficiency, therefore, can lead to lowered body temperature, intolerance of cold and cold limbs.

Chi also defends against attacks by exogenous evils. In western terms, this functions like the immune system.

Chi also retains the body's substances and organs by holding everything in its proper place. For example, *chi* keeps the blood flowing within the vessels and monitors the secretion and excretion of sweat, urine, saliva, stomach and intestinal juices, as well as consolidating the organs so they can't migrate out of their proper position.

If these *chi* functions fail, problems such as spontaneous sweating, haemorrhaging, urinary incontinence, diarrhoea, premature ejaculation, and stomach or kidney prolapse may occur.

Chi also possesses so-called transformation functions, which are important for the metabolism of blood and body fluids. *Chi*

refines these substances and transforms them into essence or vital energy.

Certain *chi* actions allow food to be changed into a nutrient essence. Indigestible food and waste products are also transformed by *chi* into urine and stool for excretion.

The organs and meridians possess their own *chi*, which works in definitive patterns.

Spleen *chi* ascends the pure part of digested food for transformation into nutrient essence to be distributed throughout the body. Stomach *chi* pushes food into the intestines to remove its impurities. Both the spleen and stomach are regarded as the sources of *chi* and blood.

Another example is heart *chi*. It's responsible for circulating *chi* and blood. Lungs are important organs for *chi*. They rule *chi* and are responsible for normal respiration, which depends on *chi* descending downward into the body. Disharmonious movement of *chi* sometimes leads to health problems.

By understanding how *chi* is formed, TCM has identified important factors for maintaining health. By eating a healthy diet and breathing fresh air, the body extracts its most valuable essences and uses them to help form the energy that's essential for normal bodily functioning.

Rose Tse and Angela Collingwood are editors for Shen-Nong, a subsidiary of Integrated Chinese Medicine. Before taking any medicine, consult your TCM or general practitioner