

HEALTH

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TCM: upset stomachs

Many people get upset stomachs, particularly during the holiday season. They may experience heartburn, bloating, belching and a feeling of fullness when eating.

Diagnostic tests often fail to reveal a specific cause. Doctors consider this a functional disorder of the upper gastrointestinal system.

Factors such as stress, bad eating habits, inadequate rest and a lack of exercise usually induce or aggravate the signs.

In TCM, digestion and absorption correspond to the stomach and spleen respectively and these processes are related to *chi* moving inside the body.

For example, stomach *chi* should flow downward so as to push the ingested food and drink into the intestines. If this movement is disturbed, there may be difficulty in swallowing, an oppressive feeling in the upper chest, bloating and aching in the gastric region, as well as constipation in the abdomen.

If stomach *chi* flows reversely in the upward direction, then belching, hiccups, vomiting or nausea will occur.

On the other hand, spleen *chi* will always flow upwards as it is responsible

for absorbing nutrients and sending them to other organs for transformation into fundamental substances.

When the spleen becomes weak, the body will be undernourished and the ingested food will turn into harmful substances and cause problems, such as loss of appetite, excessive sleepiness after meals, abdominal distention, diarrhoea, and fatigue and weight loss.

As a result, TCM stresses harmonising the *chi* movement when treating digestive problems. Herbs such as magnolia bark, tangerine peel, clove, immature bitter orange and amomum fruit are often used.

Since stomach problems vary due to different triggering factors, physicians need to consider the individual when designing a prescription. Stress or emotional distress disturb the harmony between liver and stomach, which can make people feel bloated, experience stomach pain and belching.

Bupleurum root, white peony root and nutgrass rhizome are added to restore balance between the two organs. Overindulgence in food will lead to bloating and belching with a bad smell, nausea, loss of appetite, gas or irregular bowels.

Prescriptions for this contain medicated leaven, hawthorn fruit and malt to aid digestion. Weakness in both the stomach and spleen leads to persistent aching and distention in the gastric region, and the situation is often aggravated by fatigue.

Astragalus root, pilose asiabell root and largehead atractylodes rhizome should be selected for replenishing *chi* and reinforcing the stomach and spleen.

When damp-heat has generated and accumulated in the digestive system, there may be heartburn, bloating, frequent acid reflux, belching and a dry mouth.

Herbs such as pinellia tuber, gardenia fruit and baical skullcap root can clear the harmful pathogens.

Elderly people or those with chronic problems tend to be depleted in the stomach and spleen. Herbs such as glehnia root, dwarf lily-turf tuber and rehmannia root help recovery and promote the digestive functions.

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