

# HEALTH

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## TCM

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### Clean spleen

In western medicine, the spleen – in the upper-left abdominal cavity between the stomach and diaphragm – usually doesn't get much attention. This may be because we can live without it.

In early life, the spleen forms blood. Later, it stores red blood cells and platelets. It also removes non-functional red blood cells.

In traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), the spleen is considered a vital organ and plays a key role in the digestion and dissemination of nutrients throughout the body. Its physical form is less important than its physiological functions.

Nutrient absorption and digestion processes are controlled mostly by the stomach and small intestine. But these organs rely on the spleen's ability to turn food and drink into nutrient essence.

Nutrient essence derived from food and drink is refined by the spleen and sent mainly up to the heart and lungs, where it's transformed into blood and *chi* (energy).

This is why, in TCM, the spleen is regarded as the "acquired foundation" of life and the source of blood and *chi* production. A healthy spleen is achieved with a good appetite and appropriate nutrition.

A weak spleen can be

recognised in someone with anorexia, indigestion, distension and abdominal pain, diarrhoea, loose stools, swelling and bleeding disorders.

Western doctors generally identify diseases, whereas TCM practitioners focus on identifying disharmony patterns. It's usual to look at how well the spleen is working in TCM, because it provides the nutrient essence for normal physiological functions.

There are five typical patterns in spleen disharmonies.

The first – deficiency of spleen *chi* – can show itself in decreased appetite, indigestion, abdominal distension after meals, fatigue, a sallow complexion, limb weakness and loose stools.

The second – sinking of spleen *chi* – involves dizziness, bearing down sensations in the gastric and abdominal regions, abdominal distension after meals, fatigue and diarrhoea.

The third pattern is when the spleen is unable to keep blood in the vessels. Symptoms include pale lips, dizziness, feeble breathing, poor appetite, abdominal distension, excessive menstruation, bloody urine or purple spots on the skin.

The fourth pattern – deficiency of spleen *yang* – is signalled by distension in the gastric and abdominal regions, poor appetite, loose stools, difficulty urinating, aversion to cold, and heavy and cold limbs.

The final pattern occurs when cold-dampness obstructs the spleen. Symptoms include a heavy head, a flat taste in the mouth, nausea, abdominal fullness, poor appetite,

diarrhoea, a sallow complexion, limb weakness, scant urine production and loose stools. Associated diseases with this type are obesity and gastroenteritis.

TCM practitioners prescribe herbs such as astragalus, ginseng, atractylodes, yam and liquorice root to fortify its functions.

In our daily diet, ingredients such as beef, carrots, caraway seeds, cinnamon, hyacinth beans, chestnuts, yams, lotus seed, mullet, whitefish, pineapples, dates, glutinous rice, white and green string beans and garlic can help the spleen, too.

*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*