

Is your Thyroid underactive? Chinese herbal medicine can help.

Chinese herbal medicine and the thyroid

In traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), the characteristic symptoms of fatigue, water retention, and chills are understood to belong to the category of disorders due to Qi deficiency together with Yang deficiency. TCM diagnosis is based on the identification of 'syndrome-patterns' that are centred on discrete groups of signs and symptoms, all related to an underlying imbalance. With this unique approach, Chinese physicians are able to treat hypothyroid and related conditions without the need for Western diagnostic testing – a good thing, owing to the poor sensitivity of most current testing methods.

Many contemporary clinical studies from China confirm this approach. By applying the basic herbal treatment for patients with clinically diagnosed hypothyroidism, i.e. prescribing herbs that tonify (strengthen or boost) the Qi and the Yang, the Chinese herbs improved clinical symptoms, reduced cholesterol and thyroid-stimulating hormone levels, and increased the two major thyroid hormones: T3 and T4.

As with any health concern, it is best to consult with a qualified TCM healthcare practitioner to have your condition properly diagnosed. Your practitioner will be able to ascertain what particular type of Qi or Yang deficiency is present, which of the internal organ systems is involved and what is the state of the Blood and body Fluids. Only after a thorough case history and diagnosis is it possible to devise a treatment program that is specific to your unique requirements. In TCM, every individual is regarded as unique with different strengths and weaknesses. Thus, patients with the same western medical diagnosis are often given different treatments, tailored to the unique features of their constitutional background and manifestations of imbalance.



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What is the thyroid gland and what does it do?

The thyroid gland is located in the front of the throat below the laryngeal prominence (a.k.a. the Adam's apple). It produces several hormones that are released into the bloodstream, reaching every cell in the body. Through these hormones, the thyroid gland controls many important functions, including growth and metabolism (i.e. the way the body uses energy).

Thyroid hormones regulate:

- Breathing
- Heart rate
- Central and peripheral nervous systems
- Body weight
- Muscle strength
- Menstrual cycles
- Body temperature
- Cholesterol levels

What is hypothyroidism?

It has been estimated that some degree of under-functioning of the thyroid, referred to as 'hypothyroidism', is quite widespread in the community; between 10% and 40% of the population may be affected. These people show the typical symptoms of severe fatigue, muscular weakness, dry skin, brittle and falling hair, persistent weight gain (regardless of dietary change), low core body temperature, cold hands and feet, feeling cold all the time, fluid accumulation around the ankles, lack of sweating (even during exercise and in the hot weather), and constipation. In addition, hypothyroidism may manifest in a depressed mood, leading the doctor to diagnose clinical depression. However, out of all the people with an underactive thyroid only about one in ten receive a diagnosis of hypothyroidism from their doctor, owing to the lack of sensitivity of the commonly used TSH test.

How can hypothyroidism be treated?

In patients with a recognised disease of the thyroid, which destroys the gland's active hormone-secreting tissues, the only effective treatment is with thyroid replacement therapy, i.e. they need to be supplied with thyroid hormone/s, preferably nature identical ones. However, as long as functioning tissue is still present in the thyroid, then it is possible to assist the gland to return to normal function with Chinese herbal medicines, combined with appropriate dietary measures, particularly to ensure that an adequate amount of iodine is consumed.



Why causes the thyroid gland to malfunction?

Some of the factors that may upset the normal functioning of your thyroid gland include:

- Lack of iodine in the diet
- Drinking chlorinated and fluoridated water (as chlorine and fluorine may displace iodine from being taken up by the thyroid)
- Exposure to heavy metals in the environment (e.g. lead, cadmium and mercury)
- Gluten (if there is sensitivity or allergy to gluten)
- Soy beans or non-fermented soy bean products (e.g. soy milk, tofu)
- Bromine or bromide (found in pesticides, flame retardants, some soft drinks and bakery goods)
- Prolonged stress

It is important that you avoid all of the above factors in order to restore normal thyroid function or to maintain a healthy thyroid, even if you have no symptoms.