

# Traditional Chinese Medicine and diabetes

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Years of research into the causes of diabetes and its progression, has highlighted the complex nature of the disease. It has a multitude of possible causes and of interlinking complex biochemical imbalances that continue its effects. Consequently, the conventional medical approach of using insulin or other drugs to treat diabetes, where lifestyle/diet changes are not enough, sometimes does not fully protect the person from long-term, life-threatening complications arising.

This is what makes the approach of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) to disease so relevant. It takes a holistic view of disease, rooted in each individual's own emotions, physiology and lifestyle. Any treatment is tailored to suit each person's uniqueness. The TCM prescription can range from acupuncture treatments, dietary and exercise advice, to massage and herbs. Although TCM sprang from a philosophical and cultural tradition dating back over 2,000 years in China, its ideas have been continually updated and adapted to reflect the needs of today's modern patient.

Conventional medicine can benefit from the more holistic and integrated view of disease presented by TCM and indeed the increasing acceptance of fields like psychoneuroimmunology point to a limited convergence of specialisms rather than compartmentalisation of disease. However it is this individual approach to treatment by TCM that makes it so difficult to research, contradictory to a Western reductionist view of disease, and so therefore, kept largely to the fringes of medicine. This article explores the TCM view of diabetes, research into its effectiveness and gives examples of the type of advice that a person with diabetes may encounter when receiving treatment.

Diabetes Mellitus is called tang niao bing or sugar urine disease in Chinese Medicine, although the clinical manifestations have been categorised as a disorder under the name xiao ke or 'wasting and thirsting'. The classic text of TCM, the Huang-di Nei-jing or Inner Classic of the Yellow Emperor is the source of all Chinese Medical theory and was published between 300 to 100 BCE. Even then, over 2,000 years ago, the text noted that overeating of sweets and



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fats, emotional stress, weakness of the organs and obesity are all considered related to the disease (Flaws 2002). Factors now routinely considered in devising a Western treatment protocol for a patient with diabetes.

The practitioner of Chinese Medicine uses a vast array of diagnostic tools to build a complete physiological and psychological picture of their patient and their interwoven relationships. A pattern of disharmony is described and a treatment framework is configured to restore balance and harmony to the individual. Highly technical instruments and tests are not used, but the practitioner relies instead on touch (by palpation), smell, feeling the pulse, minute observation (voice quality, tongue, posture, colour and moisture of skin, gait and demeanour etc) and questioning.

Kaptchuk in his classic text on TCM describes this process as, "based on the idea that no single part of a disease is an isolate symptom or occurrence, and can only be understood in relation to its whole". A set of symptoms will be placed in the patient's entire behavioural patterns and lifestyle, so symptoms become a part of each individual and not a separate label. A person is never a diabetic, but rather someone with a set of symptoms denoting a pattern of disharmony. This prosaic and complex diagnostic and treatment approach renders the application of research methods devised for the testing of

Western interventions, such as drugs, challenging. The goal of achieving standardisation, with replicability of method and outcomes runs counter-intuitive to the TCM customised approach. By trying to fit TCM into our doctrines of medicine, do we then lose something of its essence.

Existing research performed in China over the last 50 years is largely dismissed as much of it lacked control groups, or too few participants were involved. However while undoubtedly some of the research lacked rigour, this criticism can be often levelled at Western research, which rely on notions of statistical confidence, to infer reliability of results. It is often years later that the consequences of a particular medical intervention come to light, having not been detected by the initial research, or a closer examination of the research, reveals flawed assumptions made in the methodology. The research in China seems to offer tantalising glimpses of new possibilities of using TCM *alongside* Western medicine, and perhaps the findings are worthy of more investigation here.

Chinese research suggests that when TCM is used in tandem with conventional medicine the best results are obtained for treating diabetes and include:

a) Improving the therapeutic efficacy of Western medications.

**Continued on page 7**

# Traditional Chinese Medicine and Diabetes

Continued from page 6

- b) Reduction of dosages of Western medications.
  - c) Help prevent or eliminate the side-effects of medications.
  - d) Build patient's resistance to disease by strengthening immunity and promoting metabolism.
- (Flaws 2002, Chi-Shing Cho et al 2005)

## Can we get similar results in the West?

In China, the treatment protocols can be intensive and long-term. For example, three times a week or even daily for many months is not uncommon and can involve various aspects of Chinese medicine used simultaneously (such as acupuncture, combined with herbs, dietary advice and massage). In the West, treatment is often rationalised to a few weekly sessions, often not solely on medical grounds but due to the patient's finances, as most TCM is paid for privately. Despite these limitations (if this really is the case) good results can be achieved. Some authors suggest that treatment is most effective for mild to moderate Type 2 diabetes, and is most difficult where the patient is no longer secreting insulin, or following dietary or exercise advice (Choate 1999, Flaws 2002, Major 2007).

In a review of the treatment of diabetes by acupuncture during the last 40 years in China, Hui (1995) concluded acupuncture to be very effective in the treatment of complications associated with diabetes, with the exception of ketoacidosis.

## Blood sugar and insulin levels

Mayor (2007) has conducted extensive research compiling studies into the treatment of diabetes with electroacupuncture (where an electrical current is applied across two acupuncture points). He found that electroacupuncture has been shown to decrease blood sugar and increase insulin secretion in Type II diabetes. Furthermore, Mayor noted that regularly repeated moxibustion at particular points on the body may also increase insulin levels. Moxibustion is the application of heat using the herb *artemisia vulgaris*.

Disappointingly the evidence is not strong, and Mayor concluded that many clinical studies have investigated the consequences of diabetes rather than addressed the raised blood sugar levels that causes them. This is perhaps an



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area worthy of further study, as Choate (1998) found that research is strongly suggesting a causal link between the development of complications such as cerebrovascular disease, retinopathy, neuropathy, nephropathy and arteriosclerosis with raised blood sugar levels. With good blood sugar control research has shown that the risk of developing these complications can be reduced.

## Diabetic neuropathy

The most common complication of diabetes is diabetic neuropathy and most drugs used for this condition are associated with significant side-effects. Mayor (2007) reported a number of clinical trials and studies where positive outcomes resulted from acupuncture treatment. One study of 46 patients with chronic painful peripheral neuropathy showed that 77% noted significant improvements in their symptoms and 67% were able to stop or reduce their medications (Abuaishe et al 1998).

These positive results are unexplained from a Western medical view. There are various theories to how acupuncture works, but these remain speculative.

The causes of diabetes from a Chinese perspective are multiple and many mirror our Western understanding. Although the Chinese Medical classics were written more than 2000 years ago, they display uncanny accuracy and foresight. For example, they name dietary, emotional stress, inherited constitution and mental and physical over or under-activity, among other factors, as contributory to diabetes.

The giving of dietary advice by an acupuncturist, which reflects their understanding of the causes of disease for a particular patient, will perhaps be surprising to those seeking acupuncture treatment. Yet to some practitioners this is of utmost importance and can explain the increasing incidence of diabetes in Western countries and those countries starting to adopt Western diets. Bob Flaws, is a respected practitioner and published authority on TCM in the West. He suggests that the improper feeding of newborns and toddlers is a less obvious factor in the increasing incidence of diabetes. In Chinese medicine the digestive system takes a number of years to fully develop and mothers milk and cow's milk is considered relatively hard to digest (as is all dairy produce). Flaws says that feeding western babies on demand when they cry, can overload the immature digestive system leading to lifelong patterns of disharmony. He concludes, "to prevent growth of diabetes, we not only need to be careful of diet and lifestyle in adults but also need to reform our thinking about the feeding and health care of the very young".

## Chinese Dietary therapy

Chinese dietary therapy advice is customised to fit the pattern of disharmony presented by each patient. However there are particularly common patterns seen among Western diabetic patients, and typically advice is given on the following types of food:

**Continued on page back page**

**Continued from page 7**

1. Sweet food and drink - in TCM sweet flavours taken in excess tend to produce fluids in the body which damage the digestive system over time. These fluids can often be seen as excess fat in Western terms. Sweet things can often be craved by people experiencing stress. Consequently a TCM practitioner may give additional lifestyle advice to reduce stress.

2. Saturated fats and oils - again in TCM these are thought to create excess fluids and also heat which within the digestive systems can congeal into obstructions anywhere in the body, as the heat condenses the fluids. In Western terms these are often seen as hardening of the arteries, gallstones and cancers.

3. Alcohol - in TCM has similar effects to fats and oils, and leads to similar digestive disturbances and other conditions.

Conversely very cold foods and drinks (ice cream, cold drinks out of the fridge and raw food) can also create heat in the digestive system. In TCM, this is because the stomach requires more energy to digest cold, rather than warm foods and so becomes hyperactive or overheated. This will lead to the person feeling easily hungry, as their food is quickly 'burnt-off' and crave more cold foods and drinks to douse their stomach fire. Yet if consumed, these foods and drink will exacerbate the problem even further. This begins a self-perpetuating cycle of disharmony.

Chinese Medicine is a wise system whose knowledge base has been built over centuries and it is founded upon the astute observations of the minutiae of human health and illness. This tradition continues today and the knowledge from recent advances in China in the treatment of diabetes and other disease offers the West an opportunity to benefit too from this knowledge if we remain open-minded.

The reported 86% take-up rate of acupuncture by NHS pain-clinics in 1999

**Tale end****Oral Health**

(British Medical Association) suggests we are starting down the path of integration.

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**An Important note**

Complementary approaches should always be used to *support* the medical treatment your doctor has recommended, and should never be used instead of normal medical care. Only take supplements/start therapy with the full permission of your doctor. Always monitor blood glucose levels carefully when starting to take a supplement/start a therapy and discuss any changes in your glucose control with your GP. Only use herbal remedies under the supervision of a medical herbalist or doctor if you are already taking drugs to lower blood glucose levels –this is important to avoid hypoglycaemic attacks.

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