

Traditional Chinese Medicine & Digestion

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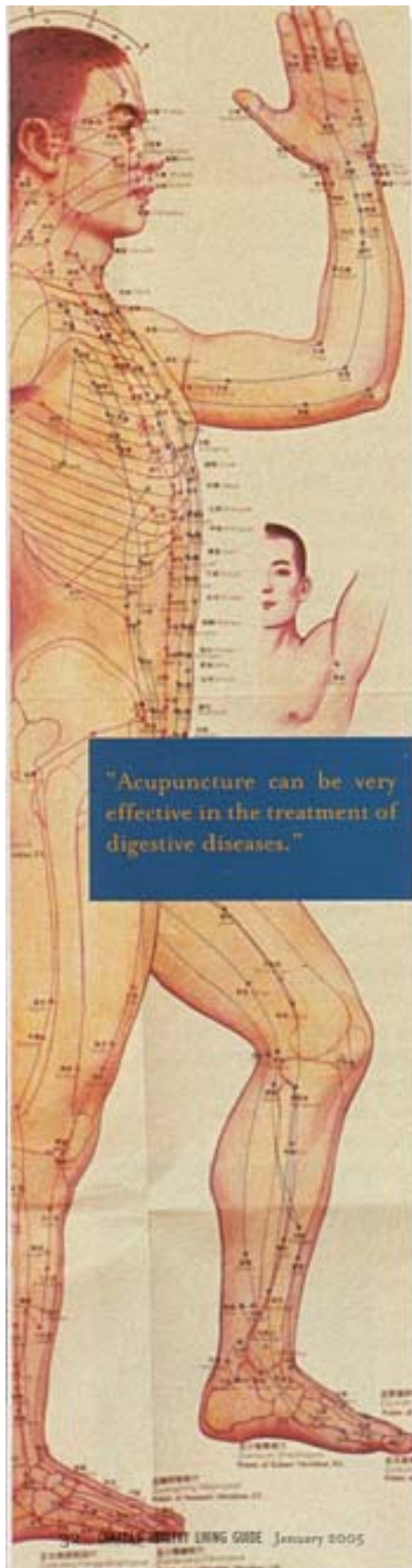
“How’s your digestion?” This is a question that I ask most of my patients, even if they come in for symptoms unrelated to digestion, such as allergies, insomnia, arthritis, or depression.

In Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), the digestive system is central to a person’s overall health. Indeed, the Mandarin phrase “Ni che le ma?” translates literally as “Have you eaten?”, but means “How are you doing?”.

Because of the holistic approach that TCM takes, all of the body’s organs and systems are important for digestion. Nevertheless, the most important organs are placed in what we call the “middle burner”—the spleen, stomach, and liver—and the “lower burner” – the small and large Intestines. As you may have noticed, there is one organ in the above listing that does not seem to fit the western medicine category of digestive system. That organ is the spleen. However, the spleen is the primary organ of digestion in TCM because it includes the functions of the pancreas which is the organ that secretes our digestive enzymes.

Because TCM has its own diagnostic system, we do not need a disease diagnosis like colitis, irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), or ulcer to be able to treat the problem. In fact, a group of individuals, all with the same western medicine diagnosis, will often be given different acupuncture points, herbal remedies, and dietary regimes, based on what their TCM pattern suggests. By assessing what

organs and energetic systems are troubled, we can work to bring digestion and related health problems back into balance.



A major component of TCM treatment is a practice that was once banned in the United States, but is now accepted by the World Health Organization (WHO) and many conventional western health practitioners. I am referring to acupuncture. Before the thought of needles makes you run away in fear (or simply skip this paragraph), think about this, an acupuncture needle is only about the diameter of a thick hair. During an acupuncture session, the practitioner tries to achieve a "needling sensation" called *de qi*. This sensation includes heaviness, aching, tingling, numbness, electricity, and warmth. It is often quite soothing and patients often fall asleep during treatment. There are many different ways for the acupuncturist to choose the acupuncture points, and although the problem may only be felt in the abdominal area, points are often selected elsewhere on the body such as the arms or legs.

The WHO lists several gastrointestinal problems as benefiting from acupuncture. These conditions include, but are not limited to, acute and chronic gastritis, constipation, diarrhea, acute and chronic colitis, gastric hyperactivity, chronic duodenal ulcer, and hiccough. A study published in the *Journal of Traditional Chinese Medicine* in March, 1992 showed that acupuncture was "very effective in the treatment of diseases of the digestive system". Acupuncture has also been demonstrated to be particularly effective in treating emotion-related ailments like "nervous stomach".

Many people think firstly of the treatment of pain when the subject of acupuncture is broached. While it is very useful in this regard and can relieve pain associated with problems such as ulcers, gallstones, spastic colon, and

hemorrhoids, it is also very effective in treating diseases and symptoms such as bloating, diarrhea, constipation, and hepatitis, to name a few. In issue #8, 2002 of *Si Chuan Zhong Yi (Sichuan Chinese Medicine)* a study of 85 patients with chronic constipation found a 91.8% improvement in bowel function using only two needles each.

Another key element of TCM treatment is the prescribing of herbal remedies. Herbs have been found to change the environment in the digestive system. Some herbs, like huang qin (scute), huang lian (coptis rhizome), and long dan cao (gentiana) are useful in combating yeast (*Candida albicans*) overgrowth as they are anti-microbial. Others, like mai ya (malt) and gu ya (rice sprout), contain enzymes that aid digestion. And still others, such as da huang (rhubarb), fan xie ye (senna leaf), and mang xiao (glauber's salt) act as laxatives by stimulating contraction of the muscles of the colon.

Folklore and more than 3000 years of use have defined most of the development of the TCM herbal materia medica, but more and more studies are being conducted that demonstrate the effectiveness of these herbs. One study included 116 patients with neither the gastroenterologists nor the patients knowing whether the patient was receiving the herbal treatment or a placebo over a 16-week period. Published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*, November 11, 1998, "*Treatment of Irritable Bowel Syndrome With Chinese Herbal Medicine*" demonstrated a significant improvement in symptoms for patients with IBS. Remember that even if you are on pharmaceutical medication, it is possible to take TCM herbs, but it is best to consult with both your TCM doctor and your prescribing physician or pharmacist.

Of course, one of the most important things to consider, especially regarding digestive problems, is diet. TCM has its own method of recommending foods based on each person's diagnosis, but there are some general—mostly common-sense – guidelines to follow. Avoid fried and greasy foods, mucus forming foods like dairy (especially as many people are lactose intolerant), excess of sweet and processed foods, and spicy foods. Eat more lightly steamed vegetables, consume enough fibre, drink enough fluid between meals, and use herbs like ginger and fennel. Also, eat small meals regularly, chew your food well, focus on eating and not multi-tasking during meals and snacks, avoid eating too late in the day, and avoid combining too many foods in one meal.

Other TCM treatments that you can look into learning for self-treatment are acupressure, massage, and Qi Gong exercises for digestion. If you take care of your digestive health now, your answer to my beginning questions can be a resounding "Great!"

Dr. Melissa Carr, Dr.TCM, RAc, is a registered Dr. of Traditional Chinese Medicine who combines the use of acupuncture, Chinese herbs, and a blend of eastern and western foods and philosophies to give nutritional advice to her patients.