Summary

- Chinese herbal medicine is part of a larger healing system called Traditional Chinese Medicine.
- Herbs are prescribed to restore energy balance to the opposing forces of energy - Yin and Yang - that run through invisible channels in the body.
- Herbs can act on the body as powerfully as pharmaceutical drugs and should be treated with the same caution and respect.

Chinese herbal medicine is part of a larger healing system called traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), which also includes acupuncture, massage, dietary advice, and exercise. TCM is a popular method of treatment, with nearly three million Australians visiting TCM practitioners every year.

The underlying principles of TCM are very different from traditional Western notions about health, illness, and the workings of the body. Chinese herbs are prescribed to normalise imbalanced energy, or Qi (pronounced ‘chee’), that runs through invisible meridians in the body. Whether or not the philosophy is believed, studies have shown Chinese herbal medicines to be successful in treating a range of disorders, particularly gynaecological and gastrointestinal disorders.

Yin and Yang

The ancient Chinese proposed that every living thing is sustained by a balance of two opposing forces of energy, called Yin and Yang. Together, they make up the life essence, or Qi - a type of energy that flows through the body via invisible channels called meridians. Half of certain organs and meridians are governed by Yin and the other half by Yang. When Yin and Yang are out of balance in the body, this causes a blockage of Qi and a subsequent illness. Yin and Yang imbalances can be caused by stress, pollution, poor diet, emotional upsets or infection. For diagnostic purposes, Yin and Yang are further subdivided into interior and exterior, hot and cold, deficiency and excess.

The five elements in Chinese herbal medicine

The TCM philosophy proposes that everything including organs of the body - is composed of the five elements: fire, earth, metal, water and wood. The herbs are similarly classified into the five tastes - sweet, salty, bitter, pungent and sour - which correspond to the five elements, for example, since the skin is a metal element Yang organ, it would be treated with a pungent herb.

Herbs used in Chinese medicine

Chinese herbal medicines are mainly plant based, but some preparations include minerals or animal products. They can be packaged as powders, pastes, lotions or tablets, depending on the herb and its intended use. Different herbs have different properties and can balance particular parts of the body. Prescribing a particular herb or concoction of herbs means the practitioner’s diagnosis has to take into account the state of the patient’s Yin and Yang, and the elements that are governing the affected organs.

Additional treatment and advice

Your practitioner might advise you to make specific changes in your diet, such as avoiding spicy foods or alcohol. Foods are believed to either ‘heat’ or ‘cool’ the constitution, making dietary changes an important part of the healing process. Acupuncture might also be used to treat disrupted Qi.

Special considerations

Herbs can act on the body as powerfully as pharmaceutical drugs and should be treated with the same caution and respect. Some herbs can be toxic in high doses, while others can cause allergic reactions. Make sure your practitioner is fully qualified. Never abandon your regular medication or alter the dose without the knowledge and approval of your doctor.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Traditional Chinese Medicine practitioner

Things to remember

- Chinese herbal medicine is part of a larger healing system called Traditional Chinese Medicine.
- Herbs are prescribed to restore energy balance to the opposing forces of energy - Yin and Yang - that run through invisible channels in the body.
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References

More information

Complementary and alternative care

The following content is displayed as Tabs. Once you have activated a link navigate to the end of the list to view its associated content. The activated link is defined as Active Tab

- Safe use of complementary therapies
- Alternative systems and therapies
- Body movement and massage
- Mind body practices
- Herbs and supplements

Safe use of complementary therapies

- Complementary medicines - tell your healthcare professionals
  Tell your healthcare professionals about all medicines you take, including complementary medicines.
- Complementary medicines - the risks of buying online
  Purchasing complementary medicines online can seem attractive. Countless sites on the Internet offer a range of treatments, usually at very cheap prices. However, using products bought from onlineara...
- Complementary therapies
  Complementary therapies aim to treat the whole person, not just the symptoms of disease.
- Complementary therapies - choosing a practitioner
  When choosing a complementary therapist, think about your goals and ask your medical doctor for a recommendation.
- Complementary therapies - safety and legal issues
  Complementary therapies are not always safer than conventional medical treatments, even if they seem more 'natural'.
- Medicines and side effects
  Complementary medicines can interact with pharmaceutical medicines.
- Seeing a complementary health practitioner
  It is important that you tell your doctor about any complementary medicine products and therapies you are using.

Alternative systems and therapies

- Acupuncture
  Acupuncture is part of traditional Chinese medicine and consists of inserting fine needles into specific points on the skin.
- Ayurveda
  Ayurveda is an ancient healing system from India that uses a range of techniques to treat illness and encourage wellbeing.
- Chinese herbal medicine
  The principles of Traditional Chinese Medicine are very different from traditional Western notions about health, illness and the workings of the body.
- Chiropractic
  Chiropractic treatment can be clinically effective for many problems of the skeleton and muscles, such as back pain and headache.
- Complementary therapies
  Complementary therapies aim to treat the whole person, not just the symptoms of disease.
- Herbal medicine
  Some herbs have potent ingredients and should be treated with the same care and respect as pharmaceutical drugs.
- Homeopathy
  Homeopathy is a form of alternative medicine that claims to stimulate and strengthen the body's ability to heal itself.
- Kinesiology

betterhealth.vic.gov.au
Kinesiology uses muscle monitoring to look at imbalances that may be causing disease in the body.

**Menopause and complementary therapies**

The use of complementary therapies to manage menopausal symptoms is popular, but the sources of information available to consumers are of variable quality and reliability.

**Naturopathy**

Naturopathy uses a range of treatments to stimulate your body's own healing powers.

**Osteopathy**

Osteopathy recognises the importance of the musculoskeletal system to a person's health and wellbeing.

**Reflexology**

Reflexology is massage of the feet that aims to promote healing in other areas of the body.

**Reiki**

Reiki is a natural form of therapy that uses non-invasive gentle touch to promote feelings of wellbeing.

**Body movement and massage**

- **Alexander technique**
  
  The Alexander technique stresses that movement should be economical and needs only the minimum amount of energy and effort.

- **Bowen therapy**
  
  Bowen is a holistic remedial body technique that works on the soft connective tissue (fascia) of the body. Bowen therapy can be used to treat musculoskeletal or related neurological problems including...

- **Massage**
  
  One of the immediate benefits of massage is a feeling of deep relaxation and calm.

- **Myotherapy**
  
  Myotherapy is a form of physical therapy used to treat or prevent soft tissue pain and restricted joint movement.

- **Pilates and yoga - health benefits**
  
  Yoga and Pilates both improve muscular and postural strength.

- **Qi gong (video)**
  
  For centuries, Eastern cultures have practised various forms of stress reducing exercises, such as yoga and tai chi, but here's one that you may not have heard about - Qi gong.

**Mind body practices**

- **Hypnosis**
  
  You can't be hypnotised into doing things against your will or forced into a hypnotic state.

- **Meditation**
  
  Meditation techniques can promote a sense of calm and heightened awareness.

- **Qi gong (video)**
  
  For centuries, Eastern cultures have practised various forms of stress reducing exercises, such as yoga and tai chi, but here's one that you may not have heard about - Qi gong.

- **Tai chi - health benefits**
  
  People of all ages and fitness levels can practice tai chi and may gain health benefits.

**Herbs and supplements**

- **Aromatherapy**
  
  The different smells and chemical constituents of aromatherapy oils can produce different emotional and physiological reactions.

- **Chinese herbal medicine**
  
  The principles of Traditional Chinese Medicine are very different from traditional Western notions about health, illness and the workings of the body.

- **Complementary medicines - tell your healthcare professionals**

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Tell your healthcare professionals about all medicines you take, including complementary medicines...

- Complementary medicines - the risks of buying online
  Purchasing complementary medicines online can seem attractive. Countless sites on the Internet offer a range of treatments, usually at very cheap prices. However, using products bought from online...

- Tea leaves and health
  More research is needed to discover the exact health benefits of tea drinking...

- Vitamin and mineral supplements
  Taking vitamin supplements is no substitute for a healthy diet...

- Vitamins - common misconceptions
  There is no evidence that any one vitamin can slow ageing, restore sex drive or cure infertility...

Related Information

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Related information on other websites

- Chinese Medicine Registration Board

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