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31

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CAN ACUPUNCTURE AND CHINESE HERBS CURE MY STOMACH PROBLEMS?

Kath Bartlett, MS, LAc

Enjoyed your article in Rapid River on sleeping disorders. Is there anything in your herbal and acupuncture bag of tools to treat GERD? I am well managed with medication that suppresses normal gastric acidity, but hate the side effects. I would be most interested in an approach that attempted to restore muscle tone to the sphincter between esophagus and stomach. Conventional medicine as you probably know has nothing to offer here. Thanks, Bill

The short answer is a resounding Yes! Acupuncture and Chinese herbs are effective for treating all kinds of stomach problems (including GERD) and happily, acupuncture and Chinese herbs have practically no ill side effects. Digestive conditions that respond well to Chinese medicine include: ulcers, acid regurgitation, stomach pain, gallstones, and bowel problems such as constipation, diarrhea, IBS and Crohn's disease. Chinese medicine treats these conditions (and more) well in a relatively short number of visits. I find that using a combination of acupuncture and Chinese herbal formulas are highly effective in treating stomach problems; however, I have also achieved satisfactory results using just one modality of either acupuncture or herbal medicine.

Digestive problems, in Chinese medicine, are often Qi related issues. Qi (pronounced chee) is a Chinese word describing life energy. The energy we use to move our arms and legs, for the organs to perform their functions of digesting and eliminating food and fluid, pumping blood, breathing, thinking, etc. One may have a deficient constitution, and therefore the digestive organs do not have enough Qi (energy) to perform their functions properly. Deficiency symptoms include fatigue (not enough qi, or energy), gas, bloating, weak muscles, loose stools (weak bowels function) and a pale complexion.

Stress is a common cause digestive problems in westernized, developed countries. When we get stressed and tense, the body tightens up, constricting the flow of energy so that vital qi does not flow properly and consistently through the digestive organs. Symptoms include: anger and irritability, nausea and acid regurgitation (stomach juices flow the improper direction), alternating constipation and diarrhea, (sometimes the body is tense, and the bowels do not move, next they get weak from over exertion and straining). These symptoms are aggravated by stress or emotional events.

Another common Traditional Chinese Medical (TCM) cause of digestive problems is too much accumulated heat in the body. Symptoms include burning pain, acid regurgitation, belching, thirst and constipation with dry, hard stools (heat evaporates the fluids). This heat accumulation is often a consequence of Qi stagnation (accumulation) due to stress or anger. The body tightens up due to stress or anger, and Qi stagnates in the warm body, causing heat accumulation.

The acupuncturist treats the problem pertaining to the individual patient. In the case of deficiency, acupuncture points and herbs are selected that strengthen the body's qi (energy) such as, ginseng and ginger. For stress related complaints, points and herbs (such as peppermint) are used that relax the body and mind and restore the proper circulation of qi. Certain herbs and acupuncture points have the function of cooling heat, such as mint, coptis and scutellariae. In addition, some acupuncture points have the general function of restoring proper digestion.

Let's illustrate with a case study. I was tabling at a Tai Qi event: a young man approached wanting to know if acupuncture could address pain from a knee injury. I replied that acupuncture is remarkably effective for all types of pain, including sports injuries, and suggested he make an appointment for an initial evaluation. During the review of systems it became apparent that in addition to fractured patella (knee cap) and a torn ACL (anterior

cruciate ligament) for which he had surgeries two years previously, this young man (I'll call him John) also suffered from low back and neck pain, burning, acid regurgitation, aggravated by job stress, and had a history of Irritable Bowel Syndrome. John was easily frustrated and tense, experienced pain in the rib area, and also had symptoms of gum bleeding and loose, odorous stools. He had a tendency to worry and ruminate, and became saddened on weekends, before beginning the Monday work week.

I diagnosed qi stagnation due to stress causing heat accumulation. (The gum bleeding and loose, odorous stools are signs of heat accumulation in the stomach and large intestine, in addition to the burning regurgitation and a red tongue body). I recommended a plan of weekly acupuncture treatments to address the pain, qi stagnation, stress (one of the well known 'side-effects' of acupuncture is stress relief) and stomach and bowel symptoms, and prescribed a Chinese herbal formula that cleared heat to address the regurgitation. John returned for follow-up treatment a week later, reporting that after one treatment the knee and stomach pain had improved. John returned two weeks later, reporting improvement in all areas after two treatments: less acid regurgitation and burning (worse with stress and spicy foods), bowel movements were normal of consistency, John was worrying less, had decreased anger and depression, and no longer experienced back or neck pain. Seven weeks later, John reported no acid regurgitation or stomach pain, no worrying, his frustration level was normal and he had not experienced knee pain in the past week.

GERD is a western medical acronym for Gastro Esophageal Reflux Disease. Symptoms include burning pain and regurgitation after meals (heartburn). The physical cause of this disease, according to western bio-medicine is: the sphincter muscle that closes off the stomach from the esophagus (the tube that connects the throat to the stomach) does not tighten and close off the stomach properly. Therefore the stomach acids flow up into the esophagus, causing the burning sensation, and regurgitation of fluids. Western medicine uses drugs that reduce the flow of stomach acid and suggest reducing fats in the diet, elevating the head when sleeping, and avoiding lying down within three hours after eating.

In Chinese medical diagnosis, the constitutional pattern involved in GERD is most often stress or heat accumulation (there can be other patterns involved). Treatment includes acupuncture and herbs that restore proper circulation of qi, relax the mind and cool heat. When stress is a contributing factor, lifestyle modifications, such as relaxation techniques, and slowing down the pace of one's life must be made in order to fully resolve the condition. Often poor diet can result in a heat pattern. Foods to avoid include greasy, fried food (fast-food), hot, spicy foods, alcohol (fire water) and caffeine. I have treated GERD and other stomach problems on many occasions and see these conditions respond well to acupuncture and Chinese herbal therapy without recurrence of symptoms.

Experienced, Dedicated, Effective

Kath Bartlett, MS, LAc is the owner of the Asheville Center for Chinese Medicine. Bartlett practices in a traditional Chinese style incorporating acupuncture, Chinese herbal medicine, Tui Na massage, dietary and lifestyle counseling to treat a wide variety of health conditions. She achieves effective results treating back, neck, knee and joint pain, heartburn, ulcers, bowel problems including IBS and Crohn's disease, insomnia, depression and anxiety, in addition to many other medical conditions.

Bartlett has been a contributing writer for several Asheville publications, including: Rapid River Magazine, Whole Health News and New Life Journal, in addition to the Pacific College of Oriental Medicine Newsletter and The Pulse of Oriental Medicine web magazine. She frequently lectures about Chinese medicine at various colleges and civic organizations, including the MAHEC Residency Program, A&B Technical College and UNCA's College for Seniors. Bartlett has appeared as a featured guest on the "Health Watch" segment of KUSI News in San Diego

Bartlett earned her Masters of Science degree in Traditional Oriental Medicine from Pacific College of Oriental Medicine, San Diego. She is Board Certified in Oriental Medicine by the National Certification Commission of Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine (NCCAOM). Bartlett completed advance studies of the classics texts of Chinese medical theory with Dr. Min Fan, formally of Bei Jing University. She received her Bachelor of Arts degree from UCLA.

Bartlett is a member of the Board of Directors of the North Carolina Association of Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine (NCAAOM) and is a member at large of the American Association of Oriental Medicine (AAOM).