

TCM: stroke

A stroke occurs when the blood supply to a part of the brain is blocked or damaged: the brain tissue becomes deprived of oxygen and dies. Depending on the type of stroke and the region affected, symptoms and severity can vary.

In TCM theory, factors that lead up to a stroke may take years to develop and are often the result of ageing, emotional and physical strain, overwork and poor diet. Lifestyle habits cause internal weakness and unbalanced states, giving rise to fire, phlegm, wind, qi stagnation and blood stasis. Sometimes these unbalanced states may interact and lead to stroke.

Although a stroke occurs in the brain, it reacts in the corresponding meridians or organ systems. As well as the typical signs like limb paralysis, speech difficulty or facial distortion, TCM physicians look for associated signs. For example, a dull sallow face and breath shortness indicate that *chi* and blood need replenishing. Limb spasms, headaches, blurred vision and a flushed face mean the liver needs to be soothed.

Numbness, dizziness and excessive throat secretions show that pathogens in the meridian need to be removed. Lumbar soreness, ear ringing and atrophy indicate kidney essence needs to be replenished.

Chinese medicine plays both a preventative and a rehabilitative role. Since individuals suffer from common risk factors such as hypertension, heart disease and abnormal blood

coagulation, TCM physicians will use "stasis resolving" methods to improve blood circulation and prevent another attack.

It is also possible to provide a tailor-made remedy for the side effects of a stroke and thus facilitate recovery.

For example, when prescribing herbs, physicians may select achyranthes root, amber and kudzu root for lowering blood pressure; red sage root and notoginseng for improving heart conditions; turmeric rhizome and mulberry twig for upper limb problems; mulberry mistletoes and Himalayan teasel root for lower limb problems; scorpion and giant typhonium rhizome for facial paralysis; turmeric root-tuber and acorus for tongue stiffness.

A basic formula called Yang Invigorating Decoction for Recuperation (*Buyang Huanwu Tang*) that contains astragalus, angelica root, Sichuan lovage, red peony root, earthworm, safflower and peach kernel is usually modified to use for stroke rehabilitation. The ingredients work together to replenish qi, activate blood circulation and clear blockages. This formula is indicated if limb paralysis, slurred speech, facial distortion and incontinence occur. Herbal preparations can be made in pill form and are suitable for long term use. Other TCM methods such as acupuncture, cupping and massage also act in similar ways.

It should be noted that these traditional methods are not directed at the brain tissue. They are more likely to promote overall health and to help counteract the debilitating symptoms of the stroke. TCM remedies can definitely improve the quality of life after a stroke by helping to retrain the unaffected brain tissue to take over the lost neural functions at the earliest possible time, ensuring an optimal level of rehabilitation.

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