

TCM: Off-colour

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When doing a consultation, a traditional Chinese medicine practitioner – like other medics – pays attention to your complexion.

TCM physicians have long realised that colour changes externally may be closely related to internal pathologies. During a consultation, physicians first check the lustre and moisture of the skin to evaluate whether the supply of *chi* and blood are flourishing or depleting. Then they look at the colour of the skin to identify the nature of pathological changes.

A “morbid” complexion is divided into five basic tones: green-blue, red, yellow, white and dark, which are interpreted with other signs to guide diagnosis.

Red governs diseases attributed to heat. When blood obtains heat, it moves and flushes the skin. Constipated people who tend to have a red face, bad breath, dry mouth and a red tongue are diagnosed as having a heat disharmony. Physicians often use immature bitter orange and Chinese rhubarb to purge the accumulated heat.

Yellow is the root colour of the spleen system. The spleen rules the body's transformation and

transportation functions, which ensure blood and *chi* are abundant, and that the body is well nourished. If the spleen fails to do these jobs, the skin turns a withered yellow and loses its lustre.

It occurs in those who have indigestion with a poor appetite, abdominal distension, fatigue and loose bowels. Ginseng, largehead atractylodes rhizome and poria can resolve the problem.

White is associated with internal coldness or blood insufficiency. People with bleeding disorders, piles and heavy menses are likely to develop a pale complexion. Herbs such as angelica root, processed rehmannia rhizome and fleecflower root will accelerate blood production.

When people on weight loss regimens look pale and are sensitive to low temperatures, physicians prescribe cassia bark and medicinal evodia fruits to warm the body and promote overall metabolism.

Green-blue is associated with poor blood flow, and often appears in cold, pain and blood stasis conditions. Abdominal colic accompanied by a pale green-blue complexion may be due to excessive coldness in the intestines, leading to improper contractions. Warming herbs such as aconite root,

fried ginger and combined spicebush root help to relieve the pain.

Heart attacks heralded by angina and purple lips and a greyish green-blue complexion can be triggered by blood stasis formation. Physicians select red sage root, red peony root and peach kernel to dissolve the stasis in the organ.

Many chronic conditions may give rise to a dull, dark facial complexion that TCM diagnoses as kidney dysfunction, depletion of kidney essence or blood stasis. Kidney dysfunction is associated with infertility, sexual and urinary problems. Depleted kidney essence can lead to ears ringing, hot flashes, mouth dryness and hair loss. Features of blood stasis are a dry and coarse skin, darkened complexion, withered hair, menstrual irregularities, stabbing pain or a tumour in the abdomen.

These colour changes in complexion are not always obvious, and it takes a qualified TCM practitioner to pick up subtle differences. It goes without saying that when you go to a TCM practitioner, don't wear makeup.

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