

TCM: Urinary tract infections

Urinary tract infection (UTI) is a common condition characterised by frequent, painful urination and difficulty urinating. UTIs can be acute or chronic.

These infections are caused by bacteria in any part of the urinary tract, including the kidneys, ureters (the tubes that carry urine to the bladder from the kidneys), the urethra, or the bladder.

UTIs mainly affect the bladder and urethra and women are at higher risk. Antibiotics are the first line of treatment for this condition. People usually try traditional Chinese medicine after a long medical history of UTIs that are poorly controlled by antibiotics.

In TCM, frequent and painful urination indicates the bladder is irritated by damp-heat pathogens, and a recurrence of symptoms indicates the body has failed to support the bladder, which is unable to resist the pathogens.

The condition is categorised as "stranguria induced by overstrain" in TCM, referring to disorders characterised by frequent urine discharge and difficult or painful

urination, which is easily triggered by temporary weakness.

TCM treatment for UTIs aims to clear the urinary tract and restore the body's support for the bladder.

The symptoms determine the herbs used in treatment. For frequent and painful urination, talc, plantain seed and common knotgrass are used to soothe the urinary lining and flush out pathogens. Frequent urination without pain may require cherokee rose fruit and euryale seed to enhance the opening and closing mechanism of the bladder. Difficulty urinating may require mantis egg-case and psoralea to strengthen the bladder.

Bloody urine calls for couch grass rhizome and Indian madder root to cool the blood. Seven-lobed yam rhizome can help clear turbid urine.

The triggering factors and symptoms of UTIs help physicians clarify the underlying disharmony that have led to a lingering condition. Hot flushes, dizziness, ringing in the ears and dry mouth are associated with a heat

imbalance. When people eat too much hot and spicy food, damp-heat pathogens are likely to accumulate and result in chronic UTIs.

Physicians will try to balance this with herbs such as anemarrhena rhizome, processed rhemannia rhizome and cornus fruit.

Fatigue, lumbar soreness, limb coldness and heaviness in the lower abdomen may be due to a cold imbalance, which can also weaken the urinary tract. Physicians will warm the overall body and strengthen the urinary system using herbs such as astragalus root, poria and largehead atractylodes rhizome.

Drinking tea made with winter melon peel, couch grass rhizome, mung bean or corn silk also helps keep the urinary tract clean.

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