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Use of Traditional Chinese Medicine Before and After Chemotherapy, Radiotherapy and Surgery

Ever since the implementation of the registry for Chinese medicine practitioners in Hong Kong, traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) has undergone tremendous development in recent years. In fact, TCM has all along been an alternative treatment that many parents of child cancer patients seek before and after treatment.

In order to enhance parents’ understanding about treating cancer with TCM, CCF Families’ Club hosted a seminar in October 2010 and invited Miss Rose Chan, Lecturer of School of Nursing, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University to speak on the topic “Use of Traditional Chinese Medicine Before and After Chemotherapy, Radiotherapy and Surgery”.

Ms. Chan is a veteran registered Chinese medicine practitioner as well as a registered nurse with years of experience in caring for cancer patients. Her knowledge and practice in both eastern and western medicine makes her a true expert in the field. The seminar was packed with keen parents who were eager to ask questions. We have compiled some of the subjects covered in the seminar for our readers’ reference. And once again, we would like to express our heartfelt gratitude to Ms. Chan for volunteering her time and sharing with us her expertise.

What is body constitution?

The food that is suitable for one may not be so for the others. This is because each of us has an individual body constitution. First of all, let’s discuss about “body constitution”.

Both innate and acquired factors affect our body constitution. It reflects our health condition in the way we adapt to the natural environment, how good our immunization system combat disease, how we rehabilitate from sickness and our prognosis.

In general, our body constitution is relatively stable but slightly changes subject to age, climate, diet and disease. Thus, we could prevent or alleviate sickness by manipulating and improving our body constitution within the “balance condition”.

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## How many types of body constitution are there?

In a nutshell, we can categorize it into several types: cold, hot, dry, dampness, yin-deficient, and yang-deficient respectively. Their characteristics are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Remedies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cold</strong></td>
<td>Averse to the cold and wind, relatively pale complexion, cold limbs, and prefer hot drinks.</td>
<td>Go well with the warm and hot properties of food, e.g. ginger, scallion, pepper, fermented soybean, onion and pu-er tea, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hot</strong></td>
<td>Averse to heat, easily upset, rosy complexion, tend to feel dry in the mouth, prefer cold drinks.</td>
<td>Go well with heat- and fire-clearing foods, e.g. winter melon, bitter melon, water melon, mung bean, banana, tofu and green tea, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dry</strong></td>
<td>Low urine output, hard stool, dry and itchy skin, dry mouth, dry and burning throat, hot nose and thick nasal discharge</td>
<td>Go well with moistening foods, e.g. sweet soup, dessert, lily bulb, honey, almond, pear, snow fungus, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dampness</strong></td>
<td>The body feels heavy, tired, vise-grip like headache, weak limbs and focal edema.</td>
<td>Go well with dampness-clearing foods, e.g. Chinese marrow, pumpkin, rice bean, hyacinth bean, dried yam and coix seed, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Yang-deficient</strong></td>
<td>A bland taste or sweet taste in the mouth, poor appetite, bloated stomach, Diarrhea, pale complexion, puffy looking, averse to the cold, get tired easily and crave for sleep, bloated tongue, dislike drinking water, epigastria distension with chilled pain, persistent and strength-draining coughs, congested chest and whizzing, thick and white sputum, self-sweating, frequent urination, nocturia, runny stool, cold hilled and stiff knees.</td>
<td>Go well with yin-nourishing and strengthening foods, e.g. dried scallop, fish maw, sea cucumber, conch, mussel, and hashima, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Yin-deficient</strong></td>
<td>Skinny built, averse to heat, insomnia or excessive dreams, easily upset, red tongue, dry mouth, dry cough with sparse sputum, coarse throat, butterfly rosy complexion over both cheeks, thin and dry looking, hot flush feeling over four limbs, low output of urine, hard stool, dry and burning throat.</td>
<td>Go well with warm property, spleen-strengthening, kidney-nourishing, vitality-lifting and lung-strengthening foods, e.g. dried yam, codonopsis root, astragalus, lotus root, chestnut, walnut and chives, etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## How does TCM look upon Chemotherapy?

During chemo treatment, the chemo drugs will add burden to the liver. The drugs will go through the liver before acting on the targeted organ, they will then destroy the cancer cells and at the same time kill some of the normal cells. The dying cells release toxicity and result in rising internal body temperature with their accumulation in the body. The patient will show hot and irritable symptoms. If the temperature level cannot be altered for a long time, it will cause harm to the viscera and organs, depriving them of their vital energy “qi”. TCM treats this as a “deficiency syndrome of both yin and yang”, which refers to the deficiency of vitality, body essence, qi, blood, fluids and impairment of body functions. In turn, it leads to functional deterioration in the organs and meridians. The approach to treating this syndrome focuses on “detonification” by strengthening qi, blood, and boosting the yang (internal organs function).

## Remedies for early stage of Chemotherapy

Need to focus on clearing toxins while enhancing liver function, promoting renal function, and maintaining open and regular bowel. Recommend drinking more coix seed soup, green turnip and carrot soup, sugar cane and imperatae juice, carrot soup, and congee made with coix seed, rice bean and hyacinth bean.

Recommended diet choices: Chrysanthemum tea, rose tea, dried tangerine peel congee, Loranthaceae tea with egg, mulberry leaves tea, pumpkin soup with rehmannia, blueberry, fruit of mulberry, and abalone.

Avoid greasy and hard-to-digest foods such as French toast, preserved sausage, French fries, glutinous rice, chicken skin and fungus; also need to cut down on raw and cold foods such as sodas, water melon and mustard green.
**Remedies for late stage of chemotherapy**

Besides enhancing and nourishing the liver, strengthening the digestive system is important to promote the overall functioning of the body; recommend taking more astragalus and codonopsis roots tea, sugar cane juice, maltose, lotus seed and lily bulb congee, dried yam, and poria.

At this stage, the patient’s body constitution will change from cold to cold dampness, and eventually yang-deficient. This will cause the body to lose its functionality and vitality, partly due to extreme heat generating interior cold, and secondary to the harmful effects of radiotherapy on the structural cells. Patients will have symptoms like a bland taste in the mouth, sallow complexion, fatigue and weakness, chills and cold limbs, long and clear urine, runny stool, craving for hot drinks, etc. Diet should focus on warming, yang- tonifying and qi-lifting.

Recommended choices are warm-property foods to expel the chills, including nutritious ones like cinnamon, ginseng, walnut, chestnut, chives, cumin, meat, lamb, beef, chicken and lotus root. Foods to avoid are those that are bloating, raw and cold, such as cold drinks, melons, fruits, rice dumpling, greasy noodles, winter melon, watermelon, tofu and soy milk.

**How does TCM look upon radiotherapy?**

TCM regards radiotherapy as a “hot evil”. As body cells are exterminated, toxins in the body will increase, hence causing the blood and lymph to cram. The properties of heat and dryness become dominant in the body. Patients under radiotherapy will go from being hot and dry at the early stage to yin-deficient at the later stage. Yin-deficiency refers to fluid efficiency as a result of high internal temperature, lack of body fluids and secretion, deprivation of body yin fluids and loss of moistening function in the viscera, meridians and skin.

**Remedies for early stage of radiotherapy**

Need to focus on tonifying qi and nourishing yin. Besides, as stated in the above paragraph for detoxification, strengthening the digestive function for fluid absorption from food, and replenishing the yin-secretion in the lung are also very important. Diet choices during therapy should be moistening and bland, whereas stimulating, pungent and fried foods should be avoided; smoking and drinking are highly forbidden.

In addition to drink lots of warm water, recommended foods include white glabrous greenbrier rhizome congee, congee with glehnia roots and solomon’s sel rhizome, congee with dried yam, lotus seed and coix seed, congee with wolfberry and white fungus, mulberry mistletoe stems tea with egg. Fresh fruits and vegetables, as well as foods that are high in fibre, rich in vitamins and protein are also good. Avoid foods that are pungent, spicy, stimulating, fatty, hot and dry, fried, such as chilli, cumin, curry, pepper and five spice powder.

**Remedies for middle and final stage of radiotherapy**

At this stage, patients will show symptoms of yin-deficiency, interior heat, heat-induced toxins, or deficiency in qi and yin. The diet should focus on nourishing yin, clearing heat, tonifying qi, replenishing blood, eliminating blood stasis and removing toxins.

Recommended choices are 5-juice mix (pear, cane, water chestnut, carrot and lotus root), millet snow fungus soup, tomato juice, water melon juice, carrot-sugar cane and imperatae juice, dried yam and lily bulb soup with minced meat, pumpkin soup, watercress honey, dried tangerine peel congee, Chinese marrow in abalone sauce, almond, fig, lily bulb, red jujube plum, honey and pear.
Remedies after radiotherapy

Usually, patients will remain at the stage of severe yin-deficiency; or some of them may shift to both yin and yang-deficiency.

Need to focus on tonifying qi and blood, regulating yin and yang, strengthening spleen and stomach, so that relapse could be prevented.

Recommended diet choices are sea cucumber soup with lean meat, dried yam and lily bulb with minced meat, soup with astragalus and codonopsis roots, clear meat broth, fish soup, red dates congee, wolfberry congee, and astragalus congee.

How does TCM look upon surgery?

During operation, the whole body function will be kept to minimum as a result of general anesthesia. The body is exposed to a relatively cool environment. Therefore some patients may become qi-deficient. More or less, some of the body tissue and or a part of body organs will be removed. The body function will be affected, thus resulting in yang-deficiency. If a lot of blood and body fluid is lost during the operation, patients will suffer from blood deficiency. If internal bleeding persists, blood stasis and yin deficiency may happen.

Remedies after surgery

After the operation, except the operative site, the weakest organ is the digestive system since food intake is not allowed prior to the operation, and the patient is unable to eat afterwards.

Recommended remedies include: awakening the digestive system by offering fresh smell of lemon, drinking dried tangerine rice water to stimulate its circulation, and drinking a juice mixed with codonopsis roots, astragalus and dried yam to strengthen the digestive system. Other preferred choices include dried yam, Chinese marrow, pumpkin, red jujube plum and lotus seed. As the appetite improves, congee and rice could be offered. In order to avoid defunctioning of digestive system, cool temperature and cold property of drink or food should be avoided.

Qi-deficient patients should consume a certain amount of food that stimulate heat and yang, such as ginger, scallion, meat, walnut, longan and chestnut. Soups can be prepared with herbal ingredients such as dried yam, euryale seed, lotus seed, astragalus and codonopsis roots. Blood-deficient ones are recommended to eat more foods that nourish and generate blood, such as beef, pig's liver, spinach and chicken; daily soups can be prepared with Chinese Angelica roots, wolfberry fruit, Chinese foxglove roots and fleeceflower roots, etc. For blood invigoration and removal of stasis, take white fungus and mulberry mistletoe stems.

After surgery, avoid foods that are pungent, spicy, fried, raw or cold, which may weaken yin, over-consume body fluids, and impair functions of the digestive system. In fact, pungent and spicy foods tend to cause interior heat that may worsen the sickness and hinder recovery. Apart from that, patients should also avoid drinking cold water, a prolonged diet of congee or overeating. Patients should also wait a while before taking nourishing herbs, such as herbal wine.