

TCM Etiology

In TCM, health and disease relates to balance of the functions. Health is not static, but rather the ability to maintain balance between the Zang Fu organs and tissues of the human body, as well as between the human body and natural environment. All are in a relatively balanced state in order to maintain the body's normal physiological function. When this balance is destroyed disease results.

Through long term clinical practice, the ancient Chinese realized that there are many factors which may bring about imbalances in the human body and thus disease. These factors are categorized as six exogenous factors, pestilential factors, seven emotional factors, and other pathogenic factors.

1. Six Exogenous Factors

The six exogenous factors, wind, cold, summer-heat, fire, dryness, and fire, are the six variations in the climate of the four seasons. They are also known as the "six external evils", and they can appear in combination or alone. Under normal condition, the human body has the ability to adapt to climatic variations. However, when bodily resistance is too weak to adapt to climatic changes or if there is an abnormal altering of the weather which surpasses the body's adaptability, the six external evils can penetrate the body and cause an imbalance. If our defensive system is strong, it simply repels the invasion or adjusts to the sudden changes; if the defensive system is weak or the evils unusually strong, an illness develops and may go progressively deeper in the body.

1) Wind

Pathogenic wind prevails in spring and is a common pathogenic factor of the common cold. It causes diseases together with other pathogenic factors, for example, wind-cold, wind-heat, wind-damp. Wind is characterized by the following features:

- **Wind tends to float:** Wind is a pathogenic factor of yang nature, characterized by floating and dispersion because of lightness. For example, if exogenous pathogenic wind causes a common cold, its symptoms are headache, nasal obstruction, itching or sore throat, etc., which are confined to the upper body. If pathogenic wind together with dampness induces disease the symptoms are swelling of the eyes and face.
- **Wind tends to move:** Pathogenic wind causes motor impairment or abnormal motion of the trunk or limbs manifested by convulsion, opisthotonos, spasm and tremor of the four limbs, and rigidity of the

neck. Dizziness is usually caused by dysfunction of the viscera complicated by liver-wind. Exogenous pathogenic wind is often the factor that induces endogenous wind.

- **Wind tends to change rapidly:** Wind tends to change. The disease caused by wind is often characterized by sudden onset, immediate transmission and change as well as fast healing. For example, rubella is marked by quick fluctuation of cutaneous pruritus without a fixed location.
- **Wind tends to be complicated by other pathogenic factors:** Since it is easier for wind to attack the body, other factors in the six exogenous factors often attach themselves to wind when they invade the body, frequently leading to exogenous wind-cold, wind-heat, wind-dampness, or wind-dryness syndrome. TCM believes that "wind is the leading one among the six exogenous pathogenic factors", "all diseases are caused by wind" and "wind is the leading cause of all diseases".

2) Cold

Cold is the dominant climatic factor in winter and as a yin pathogenic factor, it is likely to consume yang qi. It also has the characteristics of contracture and stagnation. Cold is characterized by the following features:

- **Cold tends to impair yang:** Pathogenic cold is liable to consume the yang qi of the body, producing cold syndromes. If the pathogenic cold attacks the body surface leading to a closing of the pores and obstruction of the flow of defensive yang qi, it is manifested by the symptom of aversion to cold. If pathogenic cold directly attacks the spleen and stomach it leads to the injury of spleen yang qi causing dysfunctions of the whole digestive process. The clinical manifestations are vomiting of clear water, diarrhea, coldness and pain of the epigastric and abdominal regions, pain relieved by warmth and aggravated by cold extremities.
- **Cold tends to contract and stagnate:** Invasion of pathogenic cold may cause contracture of the blood vessels and tendons, and obstruction of qi and blood circulation. This manifests as pain of a cold nature. Pathogenic cold may also cause a common cold with symptoms of sore aching joints and headache. Stagnation of cold in the liver channel leads to hernia of a cold nature, coldness, pain, and swelling of the testis. Pathogenic cold may also cause stomach ache or abdominal pain.

3) Summer-heat

Summer-heat is transformed from heat and fire in summer. Summer-heat is a yang pathogenic factor and usually appears after summer solstice and before autumn solstice. The attack by summer-heat is either due to hot weather or due to low adaptability of the body to the environment. Summer-heat is characterized by the following features:

- **Summer-heat has sweltering heat:** Summer-heat pertains to yang and is hot in nature. So the disease caused by summer-heat is usually marked by a series of yang symptoms such as high fever, dysphoria, reddish complexion, thirst with preference for cold drink and full and large pulse, etc.
- **Summer-heat tends to disperse:** Summer-heat tends to disperse and elevate. Summer-heat disturbs the mind when it elevates, leading to dysphoria and dizziness or even sudden coma and unconsciousness in severe cases. Summer-heat induces sweating and consumes body fluid when it disperses, leading to thirst with preference for drinking water and reddish and scanty urine. If there is profuse sweating, qi will get lost, eventually bringing on shortness of breath and lassitude due to qi deficiency.
- **Summer-heat is often complicated by dampness:** In the hot season, heat fumigates dampness. That is why dampness is exuberant in summer and often mixes up with heat to attack people. Thus disease caused by summer-heat-dampness is often, apart from fever and extreme thirst, characterized by lassitude of the four limbs, chest oppression, vomiting and unsmooth loose stools.

4) Dampness

Dampness is predominant in late summer but also can be encountered in other seasons. Since it is hot in late summer, dampness permeates everywhere due to fumigation and frequently causes disease. Sometimes drench or living in damp area also results in disease of dampness. It is a yin pathogenic factor with the following characteristics:

- **Dampness is heavy, turbid, viscous, and sluggish:** Invasion by pathogenic damp also causes the symptoms of heaviness, distension and soreness of the trunk and extremities. The secretions and excretions of the patient have foul and turbid features. The disease duration lingers.
- **Dampness tends to block qi:** Dampness moves slowly because of its heavy. It tends to retain in the viscera and meridians, inhibits the flow of qi and disturbs the activity of qi, frequently leading to chest oppression and fullness, scanty and unsmooth urination and inhibited defecation. On the other hand, dampness pertains to yin and tends to impair yang qi. Thus prolonged blockage of qi by dampness will prevent yang qi from flowing, often causing exuberance of dampness and decline of yang. Since dampness pertains to earth in the five elements and is related to the spleen, it tends to impair the spleen, bringing on encumbrance of the spleen by dampness and stagnation of qi in the middle energizer. If dampness impairs yang, it will inactivate spleen yang and further accumulate water and dampness, leading to diarrhea, scanty urine, edema and ascites.
- **Dampness tends to move downward:** Dampness is similar to water, so it tends to move downward and impairs the lower part of the body. Clinical manifestations are ulceration and edema of the lower extremities, soreness of muscles, and joint pain of the lower limbs, etc.

5) Dryness

Dryness is the main pathogenic factor in autumn. Dryness can be divided into warm-dryness and cool-dryness due to difference in weather. The disease occurring at the early stage of autumn is a kind of warm-dryness because there is still some remaining summer-heat; the disease occurring at the late stage of autumn is a kind of cool-dryness syndrome because the weather is already cold in late autumn. Its characteristics are as follows:

- **Dryness is apt to consume yin, especially body fluids:** Clinical manifestations are dryness of the mouth, lips and nose, dryness of the tongue, dry, rough and chapped skin, dry stool, etc.
- **Dryness tends to impair the lung:** The lung is considered a tender organ which prefers moisture, cleanliness, and descent. If pathogenic dryness attacks the body from the mouth and nose, the yin fluid of the lung is likely to be consumed. It may lead to the dysfunction of dispersion and descent, and manifest as dry cough with scanty sputum, sticky mucus causing difficult expectoration, or bloody sputum.

6) Heat (fire)

Heat and fire are yang pathogenic factors. They are of the same nature but differ in intensity. Fire is the outcome of extreme heat. These types of heat are sometimes termed pathogenic fire-heat or pathogenic mild heat and are characterized by an upward flaring and damaging of yin, with a tendency to disturb the blood system. The following are some special features:

- **Heat (fire) tends to flame up:** Heat (fire) pertains to yang and tends to flame up. So the disease caused by the pathogenic heat (fire) is marked by high fever, aversion to heat, extreme thirst, sweating and full pulse. When the pathogenic heat (fire) attacks the body, it may disturb the mind, leading to dysphoria, insomnia, mania, coma and delirium, etc. Since the pathogenic heat is responsible for irritability and rapid movement, the disease caused by it is characterized by acute onset and rapid transmission.
- **Heat (fire) tends to consume qi and impair body fluid:** Heat (fire) pertains to yang and tends to consume yin-fluid. If there is superabundant heat, it will drive body fluid out of the body in the form of sweat. So the disease caused by the pathogenic heat, apart from the manifestations of heat, is often accompanied by thirst with preference for drinking water, dry throat and tongue, dark and scanty urine and retention of dry feces due to consumption and impairment of body fluid.
- **Heat (fire) tends to produce wind and disturb blood:** When heat (fire) invades the body, it usually scorches the liver meridian, consumes body fluid and deprives the tendons of moisture and nourishment, leading to occurrence of liver-wind with the manifestations of high fever, nose bleeds, coma, delirium, convulsion of the four limbs, staring straight upward, stiff neck and opisthotonos. Blood coagulates with cold and moves fast with heat. But if the heat is excessive, it will drive blood to flow very fast or scorch the vessels or even compel blood to flow out of the vessels, leading to various hemorrhages, such as hematemesis, hematochezia, hematuria, eruptions, profuse menorrhagia and sudden profuse uterine bleeding.

- **Heat (fire) tends to cause swelling and ulceration:** When heat (fire) invades blood phase and accumulates in local area, it will putrefy blood and muscles, causing abscess, furuncle and ulceration. These kinds of problems are marked by redness, swelling, heat and pain which are the manifestations of heat (fire). Heat (fire) responsible for abscess, furuncle and ulceration is called heat (fire) toxin. That is why it is said in TCM that "abscess and furuncle are caused by fire-toxin".

2. Pestilential Factors

Pestilence factors are kind of strong infectious pathogenic factors which are the source of epidemic diseases. The nature or pestilence factor is similar to pathogenic heat and summer heat, but more serious than the pathogenic heat in toxicity; it is usually accompanied by pathogenic damp. Pestilential diseases are epidemical and dangerous, with rapid drastic changes as seen in facial erysipelas, mumps, pestilent dysentery, diphtheria, scarlet fever, smallpox, cholera and plague.

3. Seven Emotional Factors

Traditional Chinese medicine emphasizes the relation between diseases and mental activities. Emotional mental activities are categorized as the seven emotional factors: joy, anger, melancholy, worry, grief, fear, and fright. They are the main pathogenic factors of endogenous diseases.

The seven pathogenic emotions are physiological reflections of the human mental state or are induced by various environmental stimulations. Under normal conditions these physiological phenomena will not cause disease. However, if the emotions are too stressful and constant, or the patient is too sensitive to stimulation, then they may induce acute and long-standing changes which result in diseases.

Different pathogenic emotional factors also selectively damage certain Zang Fu organs. For example, anger injures the liver, over-joy injures the heart, grief and melancholy injure the lung, fright and fear injure the kidney, and over-thinking injures the spleen.

When the seven emotions impair the internal organs, they mainly affect the activity of visceral qi, leading to disorder of the activity of qi and, in turn, bringing on the disorder of blood circulation because the blood flows together with qi. Prolonged emotional upset may transform into fire known as "transformation of five emotions into fire", resulting in disharmony between yin and yang because fire consumes yin.

- **Excessive joy slows down the activity of qi:** Joy is controlled by the heart. Normally joy can harmonize qi and blood, smooth the activity of the nutrient qi and defensive qi as well as ease the mind. If it becomes excessive, it may slack heart qi, derange the mind and lead to inability to concentrate and even mania

- **Excessive anger drives qi upwards:** Anger is controlled by the liver. Excessive anger drives liver qi, together with the blood, moving adversely upwards and leading to dizziness, distending headache, reddish complexion and redness of the eyes or hematemesis, or even sudden syncope. Under excessive anger, liver qi may flow adversely and attack the spleen and stomach, causing anorexia, chest oppression and belching or even diarrhea.
- **Excessive anxiety inhibits qi:** Anxiety is related to the liver and the lung. Excessive anxiety may impair the lung and the liver. Anxiety usually inhibits qi and leads to depression of lung qi or stagnation of liver qi. The depression of lung-qi causes chest oppression and unsmooth breath; stagnation of liver-qi leads to hypochondriac distension and fullness or pain, unhappiness and reduced appetite.
- **Excessive worry or over-thinking leads to qi stagnation:** Thinking is controlled by the spleen. Excessive worry or over-thinking will cause spleen qi stagnation and affect transportation and transformation, leading to gastric and abdominal distension and fullness, anorexia and loose stool, etc. Prolonged indulgence in contemplation consumes yin-blood and deprives the heart-spirit of nourishment, often bringing on palpitation, amnesia, insomnia and dreaminess, etc.
- **Excessive grief consumes qi:** Grief is dominated by the lung, so excessive grief exhausts lung qi. Usually excessive grief affects the normal functions of the lung to depurate, descend, disperse and distribute, leading to failure of the nutrient qi and the defensive qi to distribute and consumption of the pectoral qi. Excessive grief often impairs the lung, leading to dizziness, lassitude and dispiritedness, etc.
- **Excessive fear drives qi downwards:** Fear is dominated by the kidney. So sudden terror drives qi to move downwards, leading to incontinence of urine and feces due to failure of kidney-qi to fixate or weakness and atrophy of the bones and seminal emission due to failure of the kidney to store essence. Prolonged state of terror may lead to various diseases due to failure of qi to elevate, decline of tile visceral functions and inability of healthy qi to defend the superficies.
- **Shock or fright scatters qi:** Fear and fright are all caused by similar external stimuli, but they are different in the responses of visceral qi activity. Fear, dominated by the kidney, drives qi to move downwards; fright, originating from the heart, disturbs the activity of qi. So when frightened, the main responses are disorder of heart qi, derangement of the mind, indecision and bewilderment. Disorder of the activity of qi damages the harmony between qi and blood and weakens the defensive qi, leading to invasion of pathogenic factors into the body and occurrence of disease.

4. Other Pathogenic Factors

Besides the previously mentioned pathogenic factors, there are also pathogenic factors relating to weak constitution, irregular diet, over-exertion or insufficient physical activity, excessive sexual activity, traumatic injuries, parasites, and pathological products such as phlegm-humor and blood stasis.

1) Weak constitution

A person's constitutional strength depends on the health and age of their parents, particularly at the time of conception, because the child's pre-heaven essence is formed by the fusion of the parental essences. It also depends especially on the mother's health and age during the pregnancy. A severe shock during pregnancy is also detrimental to the health of the child. Many childhood diseases, particularly whooping cough, indicate a weak constitution. Pre-heaven essence can be prematurely drained through overwork, inadequate rest, alcohol, excessive sexual activity; however, it can be preserved and enhanced by meditation, breathing exercise, and Qi Gong.

2) Irregular diet

- **Overeating or hunger:** Voracious eating or hunger may give rise to disease. Hunger causes malnutrition and leads to an insufficient supply of qi and blood, which causes general body weakness. Overeating damages the digestive and absorptive functions, and manifests the symptoms of epigastric and abdominal distension and pain, belching, acid regurgitation, anorexia, vomiting, diarrhea, etc.
- **Excessive consumption of particular kind of food:** Food intake should be varied. In this way necessary nutrient substances are guaranteed. Partiality to a particular food may bring on disease due to insufficient nutrients. For example, large quantities of cooling food (fruits, fruit juice and ice cream, salads) can injure spleen yang, and excessive consumption of sweet foods and sugar also impairs the function of spleen, leading to dampness. Oily, fried and greasy food, including deep-fried food, milk, cheese, butter, cream, ice-cream, bananas, peanuts, fatty meats, should be reduced in amount, as it may cause dampness. Excessive consumption of hot food (alcohol and spicy food) food may give rise to dryness.
- **Intake of contaminated food:** Eating contaminated, poisonous, or stale food (food poisoning) may impair stomach and intestinal functioning causing clinical manifestations such as epigastric and abdominal distension and pain, nausea, vomiting, borborygmus, or diarrhea.
- **Eating habit:** It is not only what one eats, it is also the way one eats it. Eating in a hurry, going straight back to work after eating, eating late in the evening, eating in a state of emotional tension can lead to stomach yin deficiency. The main problem is a lifestyle one, and that is what has to be changed.

3) Over-exertion

Work and rest are two activities indispensable to human existence. Normal work is helpful for the flow of qi and blood and strengthening the body. Necessary rest can eliminate fatigue and restore strength and vitality. Physical over-exertion, such as over physical work and over sports activity, consumes great amount of qi and blood and causes disease if the energy and vitality are not supplemented and restored in time. Other activities, such as protracted standing, prolonged walking and speaking for a long time, also lead to overstrain.

Long hours of stress and mental activity also consume heart blood impairs the spleen. The symptoms caused by mental overwork are palpitation, amnesia, insomnia and dreaminess due to malnutrition of heart spirit, often complicated by anorexia, abdominal distension and loose stool due to dysfunction of the spleen.

4) Lack of exercise

Lack of exercise can lead to stagnation of Qi. Lack of physical exertion can cause stagnation of qi and blood, general weakness, lassitude, and a liability to contract diseases caused by exogenous pathogenic factors.

5) Excessive sexual activity

Normal sexual activity is helpful for the flow of qi and blood and the regulation of yin and yang. However, excessive sexual activity consumes kidney essence as well as weakens qi and blood, leading to early senility with the symptoms of aching and weakness of the waist and knees, dizziness, tinnitus, lassitude, listlessness, impotence, seminal emission and premature ejaculation.

6) Traumatic injury

Traumatic injuries include incisions, gunshot and sword wounds, scalds and burns, contusions, sprains or animal stings and bites. Mild cases that only sustain injuries to the skin include pain, bleeding, bruises, and hematoma due to the obstruction of blood vessels. While severe cases may include injuries to the tendons, bones, and internal organs manifesting as joint dislocation, fracture, hemorrhage due to rupture of the internal organs, prostration, etc.

7) Blood Stasis

Blood stasis is a kind of pathological substance caused by disturbance of blood circulation. Normally the blood is propelled by heart qi to flow in the vessels. If blood circulation is stagnated or slowed down by certain factors, it will lead to retention of blood in the vessels or viscera or overflow of blood out of the vessels, causing blood stasis.

8) Phlegm-humor

Phlegm-humor can be caused by accumulation of body fluids due to functional disorders of the lung, spleen, and kidney which control water metabolism. It may also be produced by an over-indulgence in alcohol or fatty and highly flavored foods, leading to stagnation of liver qi and derangement of the functional activities of qi.

References

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TCM Discovery http://www.tcmdiscovery.com/BasicTheoryofTCM/list27_1.html