HEALTH

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TCM: blend to mend

A TCM doctor has prescribed several herbs to treat my condition. How do they work together?

In Chinese remedies, herbs make up the bulk of prescriptions, followed by animal products and minerals. Typically, one or two ingredients are included that are said to have the greatest effect on the problem. Other ingredients in the formula treat its minor aspects, direct the prescription to specific parts of the body and help the other herbs work more efficiently.

The ingredients are classified into four types according to their role in the mix. First there are monarch or principal ingredients that exert major effects. Herbal combinations usually contain one to two monarch herbs.

There are also the minister or supporting herbs. Minister herbs aid the monarch herbs in treating the problem, or they act as the main ingredients against a co-existing problem. Minister herbs usually have weaker effects than monarch herbs.

A third type of herbs are assistant herbs, which help the monarch or minister herbs to exert their effects, relieve symptoms and modulate the harsh properties of the ingredients.

There are also guiding herbs that force the actions of the prescription on the target area of the body or work to harmonise and integrate the effects on the combination.

TCM physicians always focus on disharmony patterns, and the combination of herbs should address the presentations exactly.

Let's illustrate this with the case of influenza. A patient may have fever, chills, headache, general aches and breathing difficulties. The physician will also check for perspiration, tongue and pulse conditions.

No sweating, a white tongue coating and a floating and tense pulse will confirm that the disharmony results from an invasion of exogenous pathogens on the external body.

Diaphoretic therapy, which promotes perspiration, is appropriate, and pungent and warm herbs should be used. Ephedra decoction (Ma Huang Tang), consisting of ephedra, cinnamon twig, apricot kernel and liquorice root may be prescribed.

Ephedra has a pungent and warm property, and serves as the monarch herb, expelling the pathogens through sweating and relieving most symptoms.

Cinnamon twig has a similar action, aiding the ephedra in inducing sweating and expelling the pathogens, and so plays a minister role.

Apricot kernel helps the ephedra in enhancing the lung system to ease panting, a less important condition, and so is considered an assistant herb. Liquorice root modulates the harsh properties of ephedra and cinnamon twig, preventing them from making the body perspire too much and causing internal damage. It also acts in an assistant role.

Since the first three herbs all work similarly, there is no guiding herb in the formula.

The combination of herbs reflects the holistic nature of TCM. Herbs are not simply added in a cumulative fashion but combined according to particular principles. As every medicinal substance has strengths and shortcomings, they should be carefully balanced in quality and quantity in order to accentuate efficacy and reduce side effects.

Clinically, TCM mainly uses ephedra for conditions such as respiratory problems, joint pain, swelling and skin rashes. Ephedra preparations marketed for weight loss, sports and mental stimulation are not recommended. Improper use can lead to excessive sweating, palpitations and weakness.

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