

HEALTH

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TCM: goes here

The TCM doctor has prescribed some herbs. I've been given some instructions, but I'm still not sure what to do. Can you help?

Herbal remedies can be prepared in several ways – the method varies according to the herbs selected and the condition being treated.

The method of choice when working with fibrous plants (barks and roots) and other materials is decocting them. That entails boiling them for a designated period to soften the harder woody material and release their active constituents into the water. The liquid is called a decoction.

Decoctions are quickly absorbed, have good therapeutic results and few toxic side effects. Decoctions are usually drunk, but they can also be prepared as

gargles or external solutions to be applied to the body.

It's important to follow your TCM doctor's instructions to get the best results. A ceramic or clay pot with a lid is recommended. An enamel or glass pot can also be used, but iron or aluminium pots should be avoided as these materials may affect the decoction. The following are general guidelines for preparing an herbal decoction.

Add cool water until the herbs are slightly submerged. Soak for 20 to 30 minutes so the contents can be extracted when boiled. Bring to a boil quickly and decrease the heat as required.

The specific time and heat are determined by the nature of the ingredients. Generally, cold and flu or purgative decoctions are boiled rapidly for 20 to 30 minutes.

Tonic or other decoctions that contain rich, cloying substances are cooked for longer periods (about one hour) on a low heat and with more water.

The herbal compounds and the liquid are commonly boiled down to 250ml, which should be filtered into a container. If the decocted herbal ingredients are overheated or singed, the whole decoction should be thrown out because the damaged ingredients may produce undesirable effects.

Sometimes the same set of ingredients can be boiled twice. When decocting for a second time, less water (about 500ml) is used. The two liquids created from the procedures are then mixed together and drunk in the morning and evening.

Some ingredients must be treated differently. If they are in your

prescription, they will usually be packed separately. For instance, shells and minerals must be smashed and decocted first; peppermint and cloves, which are rich in volatile compounds, are added near the end and cooked for five minutes only; hairy and loose substances such as loquat leaf and tale must be wrapped in gauze because they make the decoction turbid and can irritate the throat; and expensive substances such as ginseng are sliced and boiled separately so their active ingredients aren't affected by other herbs. Other ingredients such as honey or malt sugar should be added directly to the warm finished decoction.

If you think all that is too troublesome or you're worried about storing your herbs, you can arrange for your herbalist to make the decoction for you.

The time you take it also enhances a decoction's efficacy. Decoctions that encourage urination should be taken in the morning on an empty stomach; tonic or common cold decoctions are best before lunch; insomnia decoctions are taken 30 to 60 minutes before sleep; for constipation, it's best at night so that the bowels will move in the morning. Generally, decoctions are best taken one hour after meals. They should also be taken two hours after any western medicine.

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