

## HEALTH

Edited by Suzanne Harrison  
suzanne.harrison@scmp.com

## TCM: constipation

**I've been plagued with constipation for a long time and I hate using laxatives; can traditional Chinese medicine help?**

Constipation occurs when bowel movements become difficult or less frequent. Although it's not a serious problem, it can be uncomfortable and frustrating. Constipation is common in those with poor life habits: low-fibre diets, frequent weight-loss regimes, medications and abuse of laxatives.

Make sure you are leading a healthy lifestyle: drink adequate fluids and eat a high-fibre diet to help form soft and bulky stools; exercise regularly, go to the toilet when you have the urge, and ensure the constipation is not a side

effect of medication. Following these steps should not only alleviate the condition, but also prevent you developing complications such as intestinal dysfunction, anal fissures, haemorrhoids and even rectal prolapse.

Remember that you need not have a bowel movement every day; it is acceptable to have one every two to three days without difficulty.

People with chronic constipation experience various related symptoms; hard stools, straining, a sense of rectal blockage or incomplete emptying after a movement. TCM physicians will first identify the type of constipation and aim to resolve a specific internal disharmony.

Dry or hard stools with distension, a red face, mouth dryness, bad breath,

irritability, yellowish urine and a yellowish tongue coating indicate that heat has accumulated in the intestines. The remedy will use hemp seed and apricot kernel to soften the stools, and Chinese rhubarb, magnolia bark and immature bitter orange to promote bowel activity.

A feeling of incomplete emptying after a bowel movement, a bloated sensation with abdominal "noise", increased gas and frequent belching indicate *qi* is stagnating in the intestines. The remedy uses costus root, combined spicebush root and Chinese eaglewood to smooth *qi* flow, and Chinese rhubarb and betel nut to aid bowel activity.

Straining accompanied by abdominal pain, distension, coldness of the limbs,

nausea and a white thickened tongue coating indicate excessive coldness in the intestines. Herbs like aconite root, ginger and fennel can be used to warm the intestines.

Extreme straining during bowel movements accompanied by fatigue, paleness, palpitations and shortness of breath may indicate blood or *qi* deficiency. Herbs like astragalus root, ginseng and largehead atractylodes rhizome help replenish *qi*, while angelica root, rehmannia root and wolfberry fruit can nourish the blood.

Some elderly and menopausal women may have stools that emerge as hard lumps. When they also have dizziness, insomnia, hot flashes, sweating and lumbar soreness, the

remedy will use figwort root, dwarf lily-turf tuber and rehmannia root to nourish the body and lubricate the intestines.

Once constipation becomes a chronic problem, it takes time and effort to resolve. Your physician may advise you to follow a certain diet and other approaches to enhancing the recovery. It is crucial to follow their instructions carefully to help restore the body's natural rhythm.

**Rose Tse and Jenny Eagleton are with Integrated Chinese Medicine Holdings (icm.com.hk). Before taking any medicine, consult your doctor or TCM practitioner. Send any questions to [suzanne.harrison@scmp.com](mailto:suzanne.harrison@scmp.com)**