

## HEALTH

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## TCM: varicose veins

There is nothing pretty about varicose veins: the lumpy and bluish lines can appear anywhere, but most often in the legs. Varicose veins are relatively common and tend to run in families, with women twice as likely as men to develop them. Due to poor circulation in the affected limb, individuals may have achy or heavy legs, numbness, muscle cramps and swelling. More severe symptoms, such as dermatitis, skin ulcers, bleeding, inflammation or blockage of the vein, are usually associated with complicated cases.

Veins help return blood to the heart, and leaflet valves prevent blood from flowing in the wrong direction. When the veins weaken, the blood collects and the veins enlarge and become visible under the skin. It is necessary to undergo a medical evaluation to determine the severity of the condition and treatment options, which may involve self-help measures or medical procedures to close or remove the varicose veins. In most cases, the goal is to provide therapeutic relief from discomfort and prevent veins from getting worse.

According to TCM, varicose veins are associated with blood stasis and *qi* deficiency. Physicians will select herbs

such as astragalus root, ginseng and largehead atractylodes rhizome to promote *qi* and ensure that the blood flows upwards. Blood activating herbs such as angelica root, red sage root and honeylocust spine improve the vascular conditions that support a smooth flow of blood. These major herbs can greatly relieve discomfort such as aching, heaviness, numbness and weakness of the legs.

However, since the stagnated condition can lead to other problems, herbs are also selected according to the particular symptom. For example, swelling is a sign of dampness accumulation and can be relieved by plantain seed and stephania root (*fang ji*). When the veins become hard, it means that stronger herbs such as common burreed tuber and zedoray rhizome need to be used to resolve the stasis inside the blood vessels.

Accumulated pathological waste will cause itchiness and discolouration in the local area, which motherwort and sopora root can help clear. Pain may indicate that the local meridians have been obstructed by pathogens. Honeysuckle stem and giant knotweed rhizome can assist in unblocking them.

Limb coldness indicates that warming herbs such as cassia twig and epimedium are needed. The additional herbs also ensure that the whole prescription works more effectively.

When varicose veins become more advanced, complications such as eczema, inflammation or blockage of the vein is likely to develop. TCM holds that topical applications should be used, along with a herbal decoction. The selected herbs are made in pastes, soft extracts, lozenges or powders and applied locally.

For example, a solution prepared with equal amounts of powdered Chinese rhubarb, Chinese cypress bark, baical skullcap root and sopora root should be swabbed on the lesion several times daily. This solution can effectively dry up the area, inhibit inflammation and arrest itchiness. A cream called Natural Indigo Powder is usually applied to promote the healing of chronic eczema.

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