

HEALTH

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TCM

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The big picture

There are many terms used for Chinese medicine: traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), alternative, complementary, integrative, mind and body, and complementary alternative medicine (CAM).

Many people think of specific aspects of Chinese medicine such as acupuncture or herbal remedies, but it encompasses a total lifestyle that integrates many areas. Acupuncture, *qigong*, massage and *tui-na* are common forms of Chinese medicine. There are also herbal remedies, which can be taken as traditional brews or decoctions (or in the modern form of powders or liquids in capsules), tablets, medicated teas, wines, syrups, lozenges, topical

lotions and creams. Functional foods – used for healing and health maintenance – also fall under TCM.

Typically, people consult a TCM practitioner when they've not responded to conventional western treatment. Often they have chronic health problems, need pain management, or want a tonic to prevent illness during a particular season.

In May last year, the National Centre for Alternative and Complementary Medicine in the US released the results of a survey that tracked CAM use. Of those Americans surveyed, 36 per cent used some form of CAM, and 55 per cent of these did so because they said they felt it could improve their health when used with conventional medical treatment.

TCM treats the individual, rather than the disease. This is its significant difference from western medicine.

The goal is not necessarily to cure disease, but to get the individual to a level at which they

can live with it – or set themselves on the path to self-healing. For example, successful treatment of cancer wouldn't entail eradication of the cancer, but putting the body back into alignment so the individual could co-exist with the cancer and still have a good quality of life.

Two people with the same illness, such as diabetes, shouldn't necessarily expect to be prescribed similar TCM treatments, because their bodies are different and so the disease affects them differently.

For the most part, a visit to a TCM practitioner is similar to seeing a conventional doctor. Expect to be asked about your medical history. You may even need to provide copies of X-rays and blood tests. This is because more TCM physicians are increasingly integrating western medical information into their health assessments.

There are generally four examination techniques: visual inspection of the body; smelling

and listening; questioning and history compiling; and pulse taking and palpations. Inspecting someone's appearance and face colour, for example, may provide clues about disharmony within the body. Someone with a fever and a reddish face may be suffering from a disharmony of what are called excessive fire evils.

Exogenous evils – or environmental pathogens – are

the six natural climatic factors: wind, cold, summer-heat, dampness, dryness and fire.

They represent the natural conditions in which living things exist and aren't harmful under normal conditions.

They become pathogenic or disease factors when they're excessive – or when sudden changes occur that cause an imbalance of yin and yang.

Listening to voice quality and coughs also give clues about health. A heavy and deep cough with a lot of phlegm may indicate excessive phlegm evils attacking the lungs. A weak cough with a low voice may indicate a general *chi* deficiency.

Two unique aspects of a TCM examination are pulse diagnosis and tongue examination. Unlike western medicine, which generally takes a pulse to see how fast the heart is beating, TCM employs descriptive characteristics of the pulse – such as whether it's full, weak or floating – to detect body deficiencies. Looking at the

colour of the tongue and its fur coating also provides clues about whether the body is under- or over-functioning.

TCM practitioners tend to make diagnoses based on sensory information and a person's medical history. Usually, this is done without needing other types of tests. A TCM diagnosis is usually referred to as a syndrome or disharmony pattern.

A syndrome can be used to explain the location and severity of pathological changes, which form the basis of clinical treatment.

As an illness or disease gets better or worse, the syndrome pattern may change, and this is another way in which TCM practitioners are able to tailor specific treatments for individuals.

Rose Tse and Angela Collingwood are editors for Shen-Nong, a subsidiary of Integrated Chinese Medicine. Before taking any medicine, consult your TCM or general practitioner