

HEALTH

Edited by Susan Schwartz
susan.schwartz@scmp.com

TCM: type 2 diabetes

The incidence of type 2 diabetes has shot up significantly in the past few decades, largely because of our unhealthy lifestyle. Diabetes may go unnoticed for years as symptoms can initially appear unrelated, such as increased thirst, frequent urination, extreme hunger, weight loss, blurred vision, fatigue, slow-healing sores or frequent infections. People with this type of diabetes tend to be overweight, have high blood pressure, abnormal blood lipids and a higher risk for cardiovascular disease.

Western understanding of diabetes is not present in TCM as the latter's diagnosis is based on symptoms such as thirst, hunger and urination. Even though two patients may be diagnosed with diabetes from a western perspective, TCM physicians may see these patients as having two different "disharmonies" and so treat them separately.

Practically, TCM is unlikely to provide as tight a control on blood sugar levels as western medicine, but it's a useful complement to western treatment in stabilising blood sugar levels and ensuring quality of life.

In the early stages of diabetes, people can manage their blood sugar with diet and exercise alone. But reducing one's appetite, and exercising regularly, is challenging. TCM believes that people in this stage tend to be disturbed by heat inside the body. Excessive hunger and thirst indicates that the stomach is overheated - this can be relieved by herbs such as gypsum, anemarrhena rhizome and gardenia fruit. When these symptoms are accompanied by bad breath, constipation and a yellow tongue, golden thread rhizome and Chinese rhubarb can be used to purge the heat from the intestines. Other herbs like snakegourd root, dwarf lily-turf tuber and kudzu root promote the production of body fluids, quench thirst and cool down the whole body. Ginseng, astragalus root and poria can be used to replenish *qi* so that the body has

more energy to engage in physical activities. Physicians may increase the dosage of certain herbs such as rehmannia root, which utilises the "cloying" nature of herbs to suppress the appetite.

High blood sugar affects the major organs such as the heart and kidneys as well as blood vessels, nerves and eyes. Those who have suffered from diabetes for years are likely to get one or more complications. TCM believes that these people develop under-functioning of the kidneys and spleen, meaning the body is in a depleted state with symptoms such as fatigue, bloating, sweating, limb coldness, lumbar soreness, poor appetite, and loose bowels. Tonic herbs like cornus fruit, dodder seed and largehead atractylodes rhizome can be used to enhance the overall metabolic process and help to relieve these problems. As for heart and vascular problems, herbs such as ginseng, red sage root, red peony root and hawthorn fruit help activate circulation and resolve blood stasis. They can also ease symptoms such as chest pain and numbness.

TCM has the advantage of regulating various physiological functions and promoting a better internal environment, so that the body metabolises sugar more efficiently and is less reliant on insulin. Most diabetics find it is easier to keep blood sugar in the target range after TCM treatment.

.....
Rose Tse and Jenny Eagleton are with Integrated Chinese Medicine Holdings (icm.com.hk). Before taking any medicine, consult your TCM or medical practitioner