

HEALTH

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TCM: Zapping zits

Acne occurs when an increase in hormones called androgens cause oil glands in the skin to enlarge and produce more oil. If these glands become blocked, blackheads or pimples can develop and become infected by bacteria, causing a characteristic knobby, red appearance. Topical products are available to heal existing lesions, but it's hard to stop new lesions forming and to prevent scarring.

In traditional Chinese medicine, acne is treated according to its underlying internal disharmony. Skin and body hair share a close relationship with the lungs. Together with the sweat glands, they're often referred to as the exterior of the body. The lung is the interior organ that rules this exterior, so skin problems are closely linked to the lung.

Acne outbreaks are also a sign of heat accumulation. The heat may be a product of poor diet, overwork, lack of sleep, excess sexual activity, or a natural excess of yang energy, typical in young people. When the accumulated heat affects the lung or stomach meridians, it's transmitted to the skin, causing an inflammatory response. For example, heat usually increases in the lung meridian by invading external pathogens. Heat also occurs in the stomach meridian through overeating greasy and spicy foods. For some individuals, the skin is more complex and may involve sluggish blood and *chi* flows, creating phlegm and stasis leading to scars forming.

The basic treatment principle for acne in TCM is to clear heat from the appropriate meridian or organ, removing the underlying cause of the disease. The different manifestations of heat result in different symptoms and must be categorised so that proper treatment can match the disharmony.

In mild cases, such as acne caused by lung heat, the lesions are mainly on the forehead near the nose and appear as small pink bumps. Heat clearing prescriptions usually use herbs such as loquat leaf, white mulberry root bark and forsythia capsule. When damp heat in the stomach leads to more severe acne, pimples appear around the mouth and on the chest, shoulders and back. The pimples are topped by white or yellow pus-filled lesions with a red base. Practitioners will add rhubarb, SOPORA root and golden thread rhizome to

prescriptions for purging the damp heat. With toxic heat, acne is severe, with strongly inflamed pus-filled nodules and cysts on the skin. In this case, snakegourd root, thunberg fritillary bulb and Chinese honeylocust spine are used to encourage the abscesses to mature and make it easier to drain the pus.

When acne flares because of menstruation, bupleurum root, nutgrass rhizome and corydalis rhizome can suppress the outbreak and also help relieve PMS symptoms. Blood stasis can cause frequent relapses, healing difficulties, scars and pigments. Herbs such as red sage root, angelica root and safflower are used to promote circulation and prompt the regeneration of skin tissue. Dahurian angelica root and coix seed are also important for fading the pigment scarring.

See a reputable practitioner for a prescription tailor-made for your condition. Patience is often necessary as the body needs time to clear the disharmony and resume a balance.

You can also do all the normal things to keep your face free of acne, like washing with a mild cleanser, avoiding overexposure to the sun and eating more fresh vegetables and fruit. Abstain from smoking and cut your intake of tea as well as spicy, oily and sweet food.

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Rose Tse and Jenny Eagleton

Before taking any medicine, consult your TCM or medical practitioner