

HEALTH

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TCM: water cures

I am interested in ancient Chinese water cures. Can you tell me about them?

Water is an important ingredient in TCM. The ancient Chinese believed that water had various effects, as its nature can be changed by seasons, environmental conditions and artificial means. The well known pharmacopoeia, the *Bencao Gangmu* (Compendium of Materia Medica), has classified water into different types that provide a reference for clinical applications.

Rainwater collected in spring is suitable for diaphoretic (sweat-promoting) and chi remedies; water collected in summer is suitable for washing skin sores and intestinal cleansing; and that collected in winter is suitable for decoctions to get rid of parasites and relieve stagnated conditions. Natural flowing water such as that from rivers or streams is suitable for

decoctions treating limb problems and promoting urination and bowel movements. Water flowing upstream or against the current is beneficial for strokes, headaches and throat problems.

In the old days, cold bathing meant immersion directly in pools, rivers or lakes where the water temperature was usually less than 20 degrees Celsius. According to TCM, this makes the body surface firmer and enhances resistance from external pathogens. Long-term benefits of taking cold baths include preventing headache, insomnia, colds and flu, cardiovascular and airway diseases. They also promote mental function, stimulate digestion and improve the condition of the skin.

Dew water collected in autumn has a lubricant nature, is good for decocting lung tonics and is used for topical applications. It also has particular effects based on the source of collection. For example, dew collected from flowers can

enhance the complexion. Frost and snow water counteract conditions caused by excessive heat, such as fever, hangovers, prickly heat and skin sores. If suffering the effects of a big night out, it is advised to put an ice cube in the mid-point between the breasts to help relieve symptoms of a hangover.

Spring water is rich in minerals that help strengthen the body and slow ageing. Hot spring water is pungent and unsuitable for drinking. Bathing in it is beneficial for skin diseases, hair loss and limb and joint problems. Hot spring baths should not be taken too frequently, for too long or at too high a temperature.

Sea water helps relieve itchiness and fungal infections if used in a hot bath. It can also be used as an emetic in case of poisoning.

It is well accepted that bathing can aid in healing or health maintenance. A hot bath (above 38 degrees Celsius)

quiets or soothes the body by slowing down internal activity, which aids relaxation and promotes rest.

On the other hand, if you are too tired to work, you may try a warm (36 to 38 degrees Celsius) bath or shower followed by a short cold shower. The cold helps to stimulate internal activity and refresh your mind.

TCM physicians usually prescribe bathing or washing in conjunction with other approaches such as hot compresses, soaking and massage. They are some of the cheapest and safest remedies for common ailments and a number of these techniques can be done at home.

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