

HEALTH

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TCM: Blowin' in the wind

It's embarrassing, uncomfortable and can make social events awkward occasions. Burping, belching and flatulence all indicate excessive stomach or intestinal gas.

The excessive gas can originate from swallowed air or can be produced by intestinal bacteria. Anyone affected by it should pay attention to their dietary habits, taking care to eat slowly, to avoid chewing gum and carbonated beverages, and to reduce their intake of gas-producing foods such as brussels sprouts, cabbage, beans and lentils. In addition, it is necessary to ensure the digestion and absorption processes are working together.

According to TCM, belching and flatulence are common signs of many indigestive conditions. TCM posits that after food is broken down in the stomach, the partly digested food travels to the small intestine where it is further separated according to whether it is "pure" or "impure". The spleen takes the pure digested food, transforms it into nutrient essence and distributes it to the other organs. The large intestine receives the impure digested food and continues to absorb water from it. When all the water is absorbed back into the body, the remaining substances in the intestines become stools. The liver regulates the whole process, and the secretion of bile supports the spleen's transformation functions. TCM physicians rely on the nature of belching and flatulence, as well as other accompanying signs, to identify the underlying causes of indigestion.

If belching or flatulence is loud and made worse by emotional distress, it may be due to hyper-functioning of the liver that restricts the normal action of the gastrointestinal tract.

A foul-smelling gas with nausea and a thick, greasy tongue coating indicates that the passage of food has slowed in the stomach or the intestines. If there is a dry mouth, abdominal gurgling and pain, the intestines may have accumulated pathogens that result in qi stagnation. Poor functioning of the stomach and spleen can lead to weak belching or flatulence that appears only intermittently. This may be accompanied by a poor appetite and loose bowels. Abdominal discomfort can be relieved by warmth or pressure.

TCM remedies for excessive gas are based on these underlying causes. Generally, the treatment of frequent belching will aim to invigorate the stomach and smooth its qi flow. Major herbal ingredients used in treatment include magnolia bark, tangerine peel, clove, cardamon seed and agastache. Treatment of frequent flatulence will involve invigorating the spleen and smoothing the qi flow in the intestines, with major herbal ingredients akebia stem, nutgrass flatsedge rhizome, baby bitter orange and green tangerine peel.

Exercise, massage and soaking the feet in a warm bath also help.

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