

## HEALTH

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## TCM: Shingles

Herpes zoster, or shingles, is an outbreak of a rash or blisters on the skin associated with severe pain. Often one side of the body or face is affected. Shingles is caused by the same virus that causes chickenpox, and the virus can remain dormant in the nerve tissues after an exposure. It's most common in the over-50 age group, but anyone who's had chickenpox is at risk. It's also more prevalent in people with weakened immune systems.

In traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), this condition is indicative of the presence of a fire toxin, since shingles manifests as feelings of heat and a burning sensation. Sunlight, stress and spicy food are aggravating factors.

Damp heat is also involved due to the presence of wet, infected, fluid-filled

blisters, thus treatment focuses on minimising heat and drying up the dampness. TCM also regards external conditions such as shingles as related to internal disharmonies. It's important to find the root of the problem. Shingles may be due to liver or spleen disharmony. The treatment aims to minimise the possibility of flare-ups.

Anxiety and stress impair normal liver function, resulting in liver-qi stagnation. This leads to a tendency to accumulate heat and fire in the liver and gallbladder meridians. In this case, the body is usually quite hot and the tongue is red. When the fire toxin flares upwards along the liver and gallbladder meridians, it triggers skin eruptions on the upper body.

The spleen rules the body's

transformation and transport functions. If the transport function fails, phlegm and dampness will accumulate internally. The pathogens may turn into damp heat and travel along the spleen meridian to the skin and cause eruptions.

The spleen also transforms food into essence used for *qi* and blood production. If spleen dysfunction leads to *qi* deficiency, the body's energy stores, and hence its immunity, are low, allowing the herpes virus free rein.

Many things can lead to spleen dysfunction - constitutional weakness, poor diet or constant bouts of shingles leading to a regular depletion of *qi*. Those with these symptoms are pale, tired, have digestive problems, and a pale tongue with a greasy yellowish

coating. Treatment focuses on fortifying the spleen, replenishing *qi* and attacking the toxic pathogens.

The skin remains painful for a long period even after the rash has cleared. TCM views this as residue toxin being trapped in the lesions leading to blood stasis. The appropriate treatment is to

remove the blood stasis and ease pain. Blood promoting methods through moxibustion, acupuncture, blood letting and cupping can all help.

Avoid foods that cause the body to accumulate heat and disturb the immune system. Food with lighter flavours is recommended, while spicy ingredients with hot properties such as onions, ginger, peppers, garlic and wine should be taken in moderation. Seafood can aggravate the problem. Vegetables and fruits help prevent heat build-up.

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**Before taking any medicine consult your TCM or medical practitioner**