

HEALTH

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TCM: Watch your back

Lower back pain, or lumbago, may originate from problems of the muscles, connective tissues, joints and other structures in the lumbar area.

According to traditional Chinese medicine, chronic back pain is usually induced by injuries, muscle strain or environmental factors. This causes a sluggish flow of *chi* and blood in the lumbar region that leads to pain. TCM also regards the lumbar region as the "home" of the kidneys. Kidney essence deficiency occurs in the elderly and leads to poor nutrient supply to the local meridians which typically creates dull pain.

TCM practitioners will consider the nature of the pain and the symptoms. Individuals typically undergo special examination techniques such as palpation, and pulse and tongue studies. The disharmony pattern is diagnosed and a treatment planned based on the clinical data.

- Cold-damp lumbago manifests as cold pain, heaviness, numbness and a feeling of tightness while bending and twisting the back. The pain usually worsens in the rain or cold and warmth helps to relieve it. Herbs such as poria, largehead atractylodes rhizome, ginger and cibotium are prescribed.
- Heat-damp lumbago manifests as a hot distending pain. The pain is alleviated after exercise, but gets worse in hot, humid and rainy weather such as in late summer. Herbs used to treat this condition are atractylodes rhizome, cypress bark, achyranthes root and coix seed.
- Blood-stasis lumbago manifests as a sharp, stabbing and fixed pain, and is worse at night. Individuals have difficulty bending and twisting. Their lips and tongues look purplish. Herbs used are angelica root, Sichuan lovage, safflower and peach kernel.
- Kidney-deficient lumbago manifests as frequent episodes of dull pain and soreness. Discomfort can be alleviated by lying down or through massage. Other accompanying signs are limb weakness, ear ringing, sexual dysfunction and excessive vaginal discharge. Herbs used are processed

rhemannia rhizome, yams, medicinal evodia fruit and wolfberry fruit.

Other TCM treatments are also used. Acupuncture and moxibustion promote the blood and *chi* flows and unblock the meridians, and are excellent for inflammation and muscle strain. Pain from lumbar vertebrae or disc problems can also be relieved effectively, but not ligament tears around the small joints. Stimulation of the acupoints is usually along the kidney and bladder meridians as well as the Governor Vessel. Bloodletting plus cupping (above) is also useful for cold-damp and blood-stasis lumbago.

Here is a self-massage technique that helps to promote healing:

- 1 Firmly press the hands on the lumbar region, then rotate the hips while rubbing vigorously along both sides of the lumbar area, so it feels warm;
- 2 Clench your fists and use the knuckles to forcefully knead the kidney region 30 times;
- 3 Clench your fists and beat the hip region 30 times. Do this in the morning and evening for 20-30 minutes.

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