

HEALTH

Edited by Susan Schwartz
susan.schwartz@scmp.com

TCM: lupus

TV series *House* is a hospital drama revolving around a brilliant but sarcastic doctor famous for solving medical mysteries. As House and his team move down a list of possible diseases, you will notice that the question "have you thought of lupus?" frequently crops up. This is because systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE) is a disease known as "the great imitator", and its symptoms vary so widely that it often mimics or is mistaken for, other illnesses.

SLE is an autoimmune illness which means the immune system mistakenly attacks healthy tissues instead of harmful things such as bacteria and viruses. The disease leads to inflammation and damages different systems in the body including the skin, kidneys, joints, blood vessels and brain.

Basically, symptoms of SLE vary greatly from individual to individual and the course of the illness is characterised by remission and exacerbation. Doctors believe SLE is likely to be a result of a combination of inherited predisposition and environmental triggers.

Factors which may increase the risk of developing or aggravating SLE include sunshine, certain medications, viral infections and exposure to chemicals. Once lupus has been diagnosed, the condition requires regular medical monitoring.

From a modern TCM view, the most suitable cure for SLE may be a combination of both western and Chinese medicine.

Steroids or immunosuppressive drugs are essential to control acute episodes or serious cases, while TCM can reduce the adverse effects of western drugs and ensure a longer remission.

Specialists have obtained a great deal of evidence for this through extensive clinical practice carried out on the mainland. Many TCM herbs, such as the common threewingnut root, rehmannia root and spreading hedyotis herb, can exert a positive effect on the immune system and can be applied to help alleviate the effects of steroid withdrawal or to reduce the chances of a relapse.

To overcome the adverse effects of western drugs, herbs that invigorate the kidneys can help protect the adrenal glands and prevent them from atrophying. Meanwhile, herbs that invigorate the spleen can help relieve digestive reactions. At the same time, those which tonify both the kidneys and the blood can stimulate the production of bone marrow and relieve anaemia.

Herbs that replenish *chi* can reduce the chances of infection and ensure a longer remission, while those that reduce heat are useful in relieving high fevers.

Furthermore, many herbs can target certain symptoms.

For example, sweet wormwood and arnebia root help to clear up skin rashes while erythrina bark and clematis root are beneficial for joints problems. Liquorice root and baical skullcap root can assist with the healing of mouth sores while red sage root and notoginseng help arrest vascular problems.

Generally speaking, TCM aims to group all the symptoms together, interpret and then correlate them with internal upsets, prescribing specific remedies for each.

Patients with SLE may experience the frustration of frequent relapses or uncontrollable symptoms, and may therefore often turn to other alternatives for solutions.

It's necessary to discuss these therapies with a doctor before using them as they may not only interfere with current SLE medications, but might also exacerbate the problem.

SLE is a challenging health problem and therefore professional judgment and a thorough understanding of a patients' health needs are crucial to the optimal outcome.

Rose Tse and Jenny Eagleton are with Integrated Chinese Medicine Holdings (icm.com.hk). Before taking any medicine, consult your TCM or medical practitioner.