

HEALTH

Edited by Susan Schwartz
susan.schwartz@scmp.com

TCM: Mastitis

Mastitis is an uncomfortable condition of the breast. Its symptoms can range from redness to swelling and hardening; extreme tenderness; enlarged lymph nodes under the arm; a high fever, aching body and headaches.

Breastfeeding mothers may suffer an infection from cracked nipples, or if the breast is not emptying at each feed.

Other kinds of mastitis arise when infections elsewhere in the body spread to the breast. Skin damaged by previous surgery, radiotherapy or an under-performing immune system can also lead to this condition.

In traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), acute mastitis is referred to as *ru yong*, a condition characterised by lumps, swelling and pain in the breast and a tendency to form pus and ulcerate if not treated promptly. TCM maintains that improper breast feeding and emotional distress can allow external pathogens to attack the breast.

In addition, since the stomach meridian runs through the nipple and the liver meridian runs across the breast, the two organ systems dominate its normal functioning. Acute mastitis is associated with pathological changes in the two organ systems as they're responsible for bringing the pathogens into the breast and allow it to develop into various conditions.

The TCM treatment strategy is to eliminate the infection and promote total healing of the breast. Remedies are also designed according to the stage of the acute mastitis attack. In order to counter the early stages of a mild infection, disrupted flow of milk, general malaise, fever, chills and headache, physicians use herbs such as honeysuckle flower and great burdock fruit.

They will also select Mongolian snakegourd and Chinese honeylocust spine to soothe the breast ducts. If the infection is serious and the tissues form an abscess, physicians will use herbs to speed up the pus-forming process and help it drain out. This prevents spreading of the wound and helps the healing process. If the abscess becomes ulcerated, physicians will use invigorating drugs to increase the body's resistance and promote tissue regeneration.

Hot compresses can help relieve local symptoms. There are many folk remedies such as dandelion, wild chrysanthemum, Indian hibiscus flower and cactus flesh ground into a paste and left on the affected area overnight.

The breastfeeding mother should avoid missing feeds and not allow the breasts to become painfully full by expressing milk if necessary.

Regularly cleaning and careful drying of the breasts will help prevent mastitis that's not related to breastfeeding.

Wearing a proper fitting sports bra that supports the breasts and protects the nipples is also a good safeguard.

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