HEALTH

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TCM: warning signs

Tightness in the chest is a subjective sign; you might have felt it if you have ever been trapped in a poorly ventilated room, experienced a stressful event or emotional distress.

Chest tightness is also a warning sign of cardiac problems and respiratory disease. If it comes with breathing difficulties, wheezing, chest pain, fainting or palpitations, you should see a doctor immediately, as tests may reveal something serious such as a heart attack, asthma or an airway infection.

Tightness in the chest can be due to functional disorders that usually occur in people living with stress. Stressed people tend to experience chest tightness and shortness of breath and may sigh constantly for relief.

Chest discomfort can come with palpitations, fatigue, a clouded mind, headache, anxiety, sweating and sleep problems. Women are more likely to suffer from the condition, in which symptoms vary over time.

In serious conditions, they often mimic other health problems such as angina or ulcers. However, clinical examination will rule out any physical cause. Therefore, the only possible reason is poorly managed stress.

TCM focuses on the liver when trying to diminish the effects of stress. The main function of the liver system is to co-ordinate and create an orderly internal environment. Stress impedes the *chi* flow and stops the liver playing its normal role, and a disharmony called liver *chi* stagnation results.

People may see tightness in the chest as their major complaint but, on further inquiry, they have associated symptoms, including a tendency to sigh, breast tenderness, dizziness, a dry mouth, irritability and, in women, menstrual irregularities.

TCM physicians always aim to disperse liver and *chi* flow in relieving emotional strain. Commonly-used herbs are bupleurum root, peony root, tangerine peel, nutgrass rhizome, Sichuan lovage and bitter orange peel.

Long-term stress can easily generate internal fire, which tends to affect the upper body. Problems may include a bad temper, insomnia, headache, ear ringing, facial spots, acne and even chest pain.

Physicians will aim to clear liver fire by using herbs such as Chinese gentian root, gardenia fruit, selfheal fruit spike and chrysanthemum.

In addition, mentally demanding jobs and prolonged stress exhaust blood storage, further increasing the severity of these symptoms and leading to a cycle of symptoms.

Ingredients such as angelica root, fleeceflower root, wolfberry and longan aril are used to replenish the blood storage capacity in the liver.

In the case of menopause, mood and physical signs are closely related to the exhaustion of liver blood and kidney essence. This causes an imbalance with physiological functions and nutrient supply to the body. The internal disharmonies can easily generate fire that irritates the mind and body, resulting in poor memory, irritability, palpitations, insomnia, hot flashes, sweating and menstrual irregularities.

As a result, the therapeutic principle for menopause problems must include enriching the liver and kidney with herbs such as rehmannia root, cornus fruit, mulberry fruit and cooling down the body with herbs like anemarrhena rhizome, Chinese corktree bark and peony root bark.

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