

HEALTH

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TCM

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In western physiology, the kidneys are a vital excretory organ whose main function is to create urine to help the body get rid of toxins and excess water.

In traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), the kidneys also have control over the reproductive, endocrine and nervous systems.

This is because the kidneys store *jing* (essence), an essential substance associated with life. It's needed for reproduction, growth development and maturation. *Jing* is inherited from our parents and acquired through food.

Conception is made possible by the power of *jing*, growth to maturity is the blossoming of *jing*, and ageing reflects the essence's weakening.

Over time, *jing* decreases, causing both vitality and kidney *chi* to decline. This decline is the normal ageing process.

The kidneys also rule water by regulating its distribution and excretion. It's traditionally described as the vaporising power of the kidneys. The kidneys can differentiate between clean water – which is recycled and used by the body – from turbid water that's turned into urine.

The separation of these two is the vaporisation process. The kidneys play an important role in water movement and balance of the whole body.

The stomach receives fluids and food and is where separation

begins. The unusable portions of food and fluids are sent as waste to the intestines, where pure fluids (mainly water) are extracted from them.

The pure fluids go to the spleen, which then sends them in a vaporised state to the lungs.

The lungs circulate and disseminate the clear part of the fluids through the body.

Whatever has become impure through use is liquefied by the lungs and sent to the kidneys. In the kidneys, the impure fluids are again separated into clean and turbid parts.

The clean part is vaporised and sent to the lungs, where it rejoins the cycle. The impure portion goes to the bladder, where it's excreted as urine.

Although respiratory functions mainly depend on the lungs, deep and normal breathing is controlled by the grasping function of the kidneys. By grasping *chi*, the kidneys enable the natural air *chi* of the lungs to penetrate deeply during the inhalation process.

If there's kidney disharmony, respiratory problems such as wheezing can occur.

Jing is also said to be responsible for producing bone marrow, which creates and supports bone growth. Therefore, bone development and repair depends on the nourishment of kidney *jing*.

Deficiency of *jing* in children is said to lead to soft bones or incomplete closure of the skull. Teeth are made up of bone so dental problems can also indicate a kidney deficiency.

Hair depends on blood for its nourishment. The kidneys play a role in transforming stored *jing* into blood.

If *jing* and blood are abundant, the hair is bright, shiny and healthy. Hair loss or other hair disorders can indicate a kidney deficiency or blood deficiency.

Good hearing is said to come with abundant kidney *jing*, whereas a deficiency causes hearing problems such as ringing in the ears (tinnitus).

Genital and urinary tract disorders such as urinary frequency or dripping urine (incontinence) are also signs of kidney disharmony.

These kidney properties illustrate just how many different bodily functions they regulate.

So, it's not surprising that many TCM treatments aim to restore their function, especially among elderly people, who often suffer from problems such as osteoporosis and incontinence.

Rose Tse and Angela Collingwood are editors for Shen-Nong, a subsidiary of Integrated Chinese Medicine. Before taking any medicine, consult your TCM or general practitioner