

HEALTH

Edited by Suzanne Harrison suzanne.harrison@scmp.com

TCM

Rose Tse and
Angela Collingwood
info@shen-nong.com

Tongue tips

The tongue is a highly sensitive organ that can easily be influenced by physical changes.

Tongue "signs" are an important factor in traditional Chinese medicine assessment, as changes are believed to reflect the development of a disease.

After a TCM physician has checked the pulse, they look at the tongue. Different parts of the tongue are thought to link to

different internal organs. The tip of the tongue reflects the heart and lungs; the middle part, the spleen and stomach; its root, the kidneys; and both sides of the tongue, the liver and gallbladder.

A healthy tongue is soft, can move freely, is pale red and with a thin layer of white coating that's neither dry nor overly moist. If there's an unusual colour or a coating in a certain area, special attention is paid to the related organ system.

Physicians will evaluate the state of the internal organs and blood circulation through the tongue "body". The fur (coating) refers to a layer of "moss" over the tongue surface. They use that to evaluate the nature and

progress of disease development, body fluid, and the functions of the spleen and stomach (which are responsible for digestion and absorption). The tongue body and fur together create the tongue sign.

When the tongue is pale with barely visible fur, it's said to be a sign of weakness in the spleen and stomach. A peeling central area indicates insufficient stomach yin. A pale, enlarged tongue covered by glossy, white thick fur, indicates fluid collection and that the whole body is under-functioning. A pale tongue with a white thin coarse coating means impairment of *chi* and body fluids due to heat.

A pink tongue that's reddish

at the tip means the heart is over-heated. A pink and tender tongue without any fur usually occurs in kidney yin deficiency or depletion in both *chi* and blood.

A red tongue with yellow and coarse coating indicates hyperactivity in different systems of the body. A red tongue covered by greasy yellow fur means the organs are influenced by damp-heat or phlegm pathogens.

When the fur turns dry, thickens and cracks, it shows excess heat has accumulated in the stomach and intestines. A red thin tongue covered by black fur indicates exhaustion of both blood and body fluids.

A deep red tongue with small

raised areas and covered with yellow and thick fur indicates that heat pathogens have entered the blood. A shrunken deep red tongue with little dry, or no coating, can be seen in patients with chronic disease. A dark red tongue with bruised spots or patches shows heat pathogens.

Generally, physicians don't rely on tongue diagnosis alone but will make a comprehensive analysis combined with other methods. The tongue should be examined under natural light in the morning before eating, because artificial food colouring may affect it.

Before taking medicine, see your medical or TCM practitioner