

HEALTH

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Last week, we talked about the characteristics of the five elements – wood, fire, water, earth and metal. This week, we look at the rules that govern the relationships between the five elements and the way they can be used to diagnose an ailment.

The general rules that govern the elements include a mutual generation cycle and a mutual restriction cycle – over restriction, reverse restriction, and balance between generation and restriction.

Balance between generation and restriction is important for normal transformation of the elements to establish an intricate homeostasis in nature.

The five elements and a healthy lifestyle The relationship between the elements plays an important role in maintaining a balanced lifestyle. This is also illustrated in seasonal changes.

During spring – which belongs to the wood element – we should avoid excessive anger to stay healthy.

In winter (water element), our bodies prefer to store energy, so rest is important. Storage is an important function of the water element. Therefore, in winter, it's advisable to go to bed early.

In traditional Chinese medicine practice, understanding the relationship between the elements is the first step towards achieving a

harmonious balance in nature and life.

Mutual generation cycle This cycle refers to the manner in which the elements create one another. Wood burns and makes a fire. Fire produces ash, creating earth. The earth contains minerals from which metal is mined and extracted. When metal is heated and cooled, water droplets are created by condensation. Thus, metal creates water. Water promotes the growth of trees, which are wood. It is cyclical and continually gives rise to change and transformation.

The Chinese word *sheng* for “generate” incorporates several other meanings such as create, promote, nurture, support and enhance. The “generation” of the five elements in nature can also be applied to the body. For example, the heart, which has a fire element, affects the spleen, which is an earth element, because the heart supports and

promotes spleen function. Therefore, if the heart function is deficient, the spleen will not function appropriately.

Mutual restriction cycle This cycle refers to the manner in which the elements restrict and control one another. Wood breaks up the soil and depletes the earth's nutrients, thus controlling earth.

Earth contains water in many places, and as a dam prevents flooding, earth controls water.

Water extinguishes fire, and therefore controls its spread. Fire controls metal by its ability to melt it. Metal can be made into an axe that cuts wood into pieces, thus controlling wood.

The control repeats in a cyclical fashion and provides an opposite force to balance the generative power. The

generation and restriction properties of the five elements hold each other in check, preventing over-functioning. In the body, the liver (wood) controls the spleen (earth) and inhibits its functions in a balanced manner.

For example, if the liver's function becomes excessive, there will be over-restriction of spleen function, causing an imbalance in the body.

This happens because excessive liver function produces fire, which in turn affects the smooth flow of qi (energy).

Without good qi flow, the spleen cannot successfully transform food into more qi.

Understanding how the five elements can be used in diagnostic and therapeutic applications can be explained using the kidneys and liver. The kidneys belong to the water

element. Just as water supports the growth and development of plants, the kidneys support the birth, development and maturation of humans.

In TCM, the kidneys are known as the root of life because they store *jing*, a substance essential for reproduction, development, maturation and vitality. Being from the water element, the kidneys also control water, so disharmony of water in the body can also be a sign of kidney disharmony.

For example, incontinence indicates a kidney deficiency. Hearing disorders, or even deafness, can also occur in elderly people who are kidney deficient. This is because the kidneys are connected with the ears, which belong to the water element under the orifice classification.

Colour is another indication of kidney disharmony. Renal (kidney) failure patients often have a darker skin complexion. From a western medicine perspective, this is due to the kidneys being unable to excrete uremic toxins that build up in the blood and body.

TCM practitioners have also been able to diagnose renal failure because they associate it with the “blackening” of the skin.

The liver belongs to the wood element and controls the flow of qi. If a person has angry emotions, the liver will be adversely affected and liver disharmony can manifest as a shady green colour on the face.

Since the liver is connected to the eyes, some types of dizziness and eye disorders are related to liver dysfunction. By restoring normal liver function, an eye problem may be cured. The liver, the colour green, eyes and anger, are all grouped under the wood element.