

HEALTH

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TCM: Thirst for life

In winter, the humidity drops, making the air drier. You can easily develop a dry mouth, lips and throat, and drinking water may not help.

Food and drink are the source of fluids for the body. On entering the body, they undergo a series of processes then turn into secretions such as saliva, sweat, tears and fluids that serve different purposes in the organs, tissues and intestines.

From a TCM perspective, the distribution and excretion of body fluids relies on smooth passage through the body. Blood and body fluids share the same source of *qi* that motivates the fluid transformation processes.

Although a dry mouth or thirst is rarely considered a major complaint, they can be important indications. In a TCM consultation, saliva secretion and perception of thirst are important for evaluating the sufficiency of body fluids and their flow through the body. Physicians usually ask whether the person feels mouth dryness, whether he or she feels thirsty, has a preference for cold or hot drinks, and the frequency and amount of beverages consumed.

TCM claims that low humidity can easily impair lung function by causing dryness of the mouth, throat and nose, cracked lips and even a dry cough. In contrast, hot and humid weather can lead to a sluggish fluid flow, and people may experience mouth dryness without feeling thirsty. Other symptoms can include heavy limbs, fatigue, poor appetite and a feverish sensation.

Thirst occurring after excessive sweating, vomiting, diarrhoea or increased urination indicates a depletion of body fluids and a need to replace the lost fluid as soon as possible. In febrile (fever) diseases, thirst and excessive drinking indicate that pathogens have

invaded the body and are consuming bodily fluids. Those suffering from such conditions may also show a preference for cold drinks, and suffer from profuse sweating, a high fever and strong pulse. In the later stages of febrile diseases, the kidneys are affected which manifests with symptoms such as a dry mouth and throat, red cheeks, a feverish sensation, irritability, and night sweats.

Blood stasis (circulation problems) can also affect the flow and function of body fluids. Individuals with this condition may present with a dry mouth. They don't feel thirsty, but only want to take a sip of water to wet the mouth. They can also suffer from fever, pain or tumours. Their tongues are usually a dark-blue colour.

If *qi* dysfunction is the cause, the person will have a dry mouth without feeling thirsty or prefer hot drinks, with vomiting or nausea sometimes occurring after drinking. Other signs may include dizziness, swollen limbs and urinary difficulty. Diabetes usually manifests itself with frequent urination, thirst and hunger. If there is an obvious thirst and urination with average appetite, TCM believes it is mainly a lung problem. If the three symptoms exist and the person is skinny, then it is mainly a stomach problem.

Adequate saliva secretion ensures good oral health and enjoyment of food. For healthy people, a dry mouth may be due to medication, smoking, snoring or breathing through the mouth while asleep. If your condition persists, make an appointment to see your doctor or dentist.

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