

HEALTH

Edited by Suzanne Harrison suzanne.harrison@scmp.com

TCM

Rose Tse and Jenny Eagleton
info@shen-nong.com

From A to Zzz

Hong Kong appears to be a city of insomniacs from the number of shut eyes and nodding heads on public transport.

Lack of sleep can interfere with memory, energy levels, mental abilities and emotions.

Traditional Chinese medicine regards sleep as important for maintaining the balance of yin (which predominates at night) and yang (which predominates during the day).

Because there's so much new

growth in spring and summer, we should wake up earlier and go to bed later, in response to the active force of the seasons.

In autumn, yin starts to rise and yang begins to wane. We need not wake up as early as in spring, nor not go to bed as early as in winter.

TCM also stresses the need to observe the body's natural daily cycle. The so-called organ-time clock (the meridians) specifies certain times for restoring the energy of certain organs. Times that should be spent asleep are:

- 11pm-1am for the gallbladder;
- 1am-3am for the liver;
- 3am-5 am for the lungs; and
- 5am-7am for the large intestine.

Insomnia is the most common sleep disorder. TCM

identifies a disturbance of the *shen*, or spirit. This refers to mental activities, consciousness or thought and is housed in the heart. It governs every aspect of the physical body, and also represents how vital it appears.

If these organs are out of balance, *shen* will not act as it should, leading to memory problems, low energy levels and confusion.

Insomnia takes various forms: dream-disturbed sleep, difficulty falling asleep, waking up easily, and waking up at a specific time every night.

Dream-disturbed sleep indicates a spleen/heart imbalance, which is usually associated with symptoms such as palpitations, dizziness, fatigue

and absent-mindedness. When it's accompanied by excessive timidity or nervousness, the heart alone is weakened. If the individual feels irritable, has a tendency to sigh or is depressed, liver stagnation is the cause.

Difficulty falling asleep is connected to an excess of fire inside the body. Many people can fall asleep easily, but wake up some time later and find it difficult to go back to sleep again. In TCM, they are said to be suffering from a blood- and *chi*-deficiency pattern – for example, a heart/spleen deficiency.

A combination of acupuncture and Chinese herbal formulas provides the quickest and most effective results, according to TCM. One of the most popular herbs for treating insomnia is sour jujube seed (left). This nourishes the heart and liver and is said to bring on feelings of tranquility. This makes it effective in dealing with stress and anxiety.

For those with a heart/spleen disorder, *gui pi wan* (restore the spleen pills) is a useful herbal formula because it helps to replenish exhausted blood.

Insomnia caused by a kidney/heart disharmony is also quite common, especially in women nearing menopause and for the elderly.

Tian wang bu xin dan (Heaven king heart-nourishing pellets) is an old sedative formula that's often used for kidney/heart imbalances and works by replenishing blood, nourishing yin, tonifying the heart and calming the spirit.

Before taking any medicine, consult your TCM or medical practitioner

