

HEALTH

Edited by Susan Schwartz
susan.schwartz@scmp.com

TCM: Christmas bellies

Business lunches and banquets can be a pain. At this time of year there are so many parties and food-centred activities that an upset stomach is almost to be expected.

Overeating and heavy meals disturb the stomach's normal activity, and its acidic contents can be squeezed up the oesophagus, causing heartburn. Overproduction of acid may lead to stomach ache and sluggish digestion, resulting in fullness, bloating or belching.

When eating, try to eat smaller bites, chewing slowly and thoroughly, and drinking liquid to help food go down properly. Getting up and walking around after a meal can help the stomach and bowels move more smoothly.

For a few days after a major feast, maintain a lighter diet and drink

plenty of water so the organs can work and rest properly.

For most people who just need temporary relief from a feeling of fullness and bloating, herbs that aid digestion, such as hawthorn fruit, germinated barley and germinated grain can help. Take about 10g of one of these herbs, prepare it as a hot tea and drink it regularly until the discomfort clears. A TCM remedy called Preserve Harmony Pill (Bao He Wan), may also help.

If you already have poor gastrointestinal function, overeating often leads to a relapse or worsening of symptoms such as stomach ache, heartburn, nausea, acid belching, bad breath, flatulence, diarrhoea and even anorexia. TCM regards that as "food stagnation", which affects digestion

more extensively, and appropriate remedies will be required to treat it.

Before writing a prescription, TCM practitioners first need to identify the food and drink that have led to the condition and to select herbs to resolve the stagnation.

For those who have overdone meat and greasy foods, for instance, hawthorn fruit can help. For excessive consumption of pasta and grains, germinated barley and germinated grain is used. Medicated leaven is a remedy for too much alcohol or stubborn indigestion, and chicken gizzard-skin is good for those who have eaten too many uncooked, cold or hard-to-digest foods.

Some herbs can be combined to soothe the stomach and aid digestion, such as areca seed, dried tangerine peel

and immature bitter orange; these also relieve bloating, nausea and belching.

TCM holds that symptoms such as abdominal distension, constipation and diarrhoea arise due to stagnated food transforming into pathogens, and that herbs such as Chinese rhubarb, golden thread rhizome and baical skullcap root help purge them.

If someone experiences a loss of appetite and fatigue, and excretes loose

stools mixed with undigested food, this signifies poor absorption. Herbs such as ginseng, Chinese yams and large-head atractylodes rhizome are used to invigorate digestion and absorption.

Indigestion can be easy to treat, but even when its symptoms have disappeared, TCM practitioners will suggest that for a period afterwards that the individual take certain tonics to strengthen the digestive system, as the secretions, movements and the mucus lining of the digestive tract usually take some time to recover fully.

Rose Tse and Jenny Eagleton are with Integrated Chinese Medicine Holdings (icm.com.hk). Before taking any medicine, consult your TCM or medical practitioner.