

## HEALTH

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## TCM: five alive

**I am confused about what the five elements mean in TCM. Can you explain how they work?**

The ancient Chinese used the yin-yang theory to explain how the body worked, but that was too simple to incorporate into medical practice.

The five elements theory was then developed to guide clinical diagnosis and treatment.

The theory asserts that our material world is divided into five basic elements: wood, fire, water, metal and earth. It is the constant interactions between these elements that make everything come together and stay in harmony.

Working with a five elements chart, physicians are able to interpret the physiology or pathology of the body. Wood, for example, corresponds to the liver, gall bladder, eyes and tendons in the body. Liver diseases will affect the

gall bladder and result in poor vision and joint weakness.

In TCM, the harmonious relationships between the five organ systems are important for health. Basically, the interactions between them results in two cycles: supportive and regulative.

Some examples of supportive cycles include:

- The kidney supports the liver; the liver supports the heart; the heart supports the spleen; the spleen supports the lung; the lung supports the kidney.

As the paired systems support each other, physicians always consider these supportive relationships in certain conditions. For example, hot flushes are common during menopause, but they vary for each woman. In TCM, hot flushes are mainly associated with liver and kidney disharmonies, so physicians will further look into the correlation between the two organs.

Frequent bouts of a hot feeling that surges up to the head, blurred vision, night sweats, warm palms and soles indicate that the problem is due to a weak kidney failing to support the liver.

The remedy should aim to invigorate the kidney. On the other hand, when hot flushes are accompanied by dizziness, ear ringing, vivid dreams and irritability, then the problem is due to a hyperactive liver damaging the kidney. The remedy should aim to clear the liver and nourish the kidney.

Regulative cycle sequences include:

- The lung regulating the liver; the liver regulating the spleen; the spleen regulating the kidney; the kidney regulating the heart; and the heart regulating the lung.

Clinically, the paired systems restrict each other, and these regulative relationships are essential considerations for some conditions.

For example, the liver regulates the digestive power of the spleen. If the liver becomes stimulated (usually during stressful events), then it will over-control

the spleen and disturb digestion, which may result in irritable bowels.

Oedema (general swelling) is usually relieved by promoting urination. However, this may further harm the body. Physicians will invigorate the spleen to control the fluid metabolism of the kidney, and this can largely improve the fluid movement and balance of the whole body.

The yin-yang and five elements theories are systems of thought that help us see the body in a holistic way and to think about dual aspects when it comes to health.

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