

Chinese Herbal Medicine



About Chinese Herbal Medicine

Herbal medicine is the main modality of treatment within Traditional Chinese Medicine. Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) is the world's oldest, continually practiced, professional medicine. Its written history stretches back not less than 2,500 years and its practice is undoubtedly much older than that. Acupuncture was the first Chinese medical modality to gain wide acceptance in the West, and Chinese herbal medicine is quickly establishing itself as one of the most popular and effective medical therapies in the West.

What's the difference between Western folk herbalism and Chinese herbal medicine?

Western folk herbalism primarily treats diseases or symptoms, such as headaches, runny nose, menstrual pain, etc. Chinese herbal medicine, when practiced as part of TCM, is based on an individualized pattern diagnosis as well as a disease diagnosis. This means the TCM patient receives a custom written herbal prescription designed to treat both the symptom or disease and also their own individual pattern. Such a TCM pattern is made up of a person's signs and symptoms as well as their emotional temperament and bodily constitution.

Are there other differences?

Western folk herbalism primarily uses single herbs or groups of herbs which treat the same symptom or disease. TCM formulas include from 6-18 herbs. They are carefully crafted to include herbs addressing a person's main symptoms as well as their entire pattern.

Why don't Chinese herbal medicine practitioners refine and purify the crude herbs, extract and concentrate their active ingredients, and produce modern medications in capsules and ampules?

The modern Western way is not necessarily nature's way, and nature's way, which never changes, is the way the Chinese have been following since the beginning of medicine. It is also the way that herbal medicine works most effectively. Nature gave us our medicine. While the effects of the natural forms are slower, the effects are real and actually balance the person's condition and get to the root of the problem. There are no ill side-effects, because nature balances itself perfectly. The herb, in its natural state, is more suitable for gradual absorption and metabolizability into the body because the active ingredients are accompanied by other natural ingredients in the plant. These act as metabolic buffers and prevent the shocks to the system caused by concentrated chemicals.

For example, the Chinese herb ma huang, (Ephedra sinica). The roots and stems contain up to one percent of the alkaloid, ephedrine, which is the world's most effective preventive for bronchial asthma. This herb has now become scarce and quite expensive in Asia because the Western pharmaceutical industry buys up most of the available supply to refine the "modern" drug ephedrine from it. Refined, concentrated ephedrine brings immediate relief to those who suffer from bronchial asthma, but not only is the cost of the drug high, but so is the cost to the body; in its refined, Western form, ephedrine over stimulates the heart muscle, causing palpitations and hypertension. It raises the blood pressure considerably and it induces a general state of nervous sensitivity. Obviously, such side effects are exhausting in the long run and intolerable for patients with high blood pressure or weak hearts. It has been put in "energy" formulas in the past in the United States, until it was outlawed.

The Chinese, however, use ma huang in its crude, natural form. While the effects are slower, there are no ill side-effects. The drug, in its natural state, is more suitable for gradual absorption into the metabolism of the body because the active ingredient, ephedrine, is accompanied by other natural ingredients in the plant. These are the metabolic buffers. Using crude herbs, the Chinese physician has the option to select not only the appropriate ingredients but also the appropriate method of preparing them for each individual patient.

How Chinese Herbal Medicine Benefits You

Acupuncture Plus

A Division of Martial Arts Plus Acupuncture Equals Health, Inc.

310 E. Monte Vista Ave., Suite B

Vacaville, CA 95688

(707) 455-0638



The traditional methods of preparing herbal prescriptions permit the herbalist to balance precisely and tune carefully the net effects of the prescription, according to the patient's individual needs. These methods of selecting and combining the appropriate herbs are therefore every bit as important as the ingredients themselves. It is important that people do not self-prescribe if they are not a qualified herbalist in Chinese medicine.

How can a patient prepare the raw herbs that the Chinese herbalist has selected for his/her prescription?

The herbs are placed in a clean, earthenware or stainless steel cooking vessel with 3-4 cups of water, covered with a lid, and boiled until nearly half of the liquid has evaporated. The amount of water, boiling time, and heat intensity all depend upon the type of herbs used. Fragrant, aromatic herbs such as mint, rosebuds, and cardamom are boiled for a short time over low heat. Mineral-derived ingredients, however, must be finely ground and first boiled alone over intense heat before the remaining herbs are added. After boiling, the broth is strained. Your Chinese medicine herbalist will provide you with proper cooking instructions.

What is Chinese herbal medicine good for?

It treats the full range of human disease. It treats acute disease, like intestinal flu and the common cold, as well as chronic diseases, such as allergies, gynecological disorders, autoimmune diseases, chronic viral diseases, degenerative diseases due to aging, etc. In particular, Chinese herbal medicine is especially good for promoting the body's ability to heal and recuperate.

How long does it take to see results with Chinese herbal medicine?

In acute conditions, results can be expected in a matter of hours. In chronic conditions, some results should be seen within two weeks. Chronic conditions may require taking Chinese herbal medicine for a long time, but signs that the medicine is working will be apparent to patient and practitioner alike. It can take up to three months to see a considerable change.

How do I know if a practitioner is professionally trained in Chinese herbal medicine?

In California, all acupuncturists must pass a licensing test which includes Chinese herbal medicine. So a licensed acupuncturist in California would be qualified. It is important that a practitioner be adequately schooled in the use of Chinese herbal medicine. Patients should not try to self-diagnose or self-prescribe. It does require a trained, knowledgeable practitioner for the medicine to be effective and safe.

In what form are the Chinese herbs taken?

The most common method of taking Chinese herbal medicine is as a decoction. This means that the herbs are boiled for 30 minutes to an hour or more and then strained and drunk 2-3 times per day. However, there are also herbal pills, tinctures, and powdered extracts for those who do not have the time or taste for drinking traditional decoctions.



What are the benefits of drinking Chinese herbs in a decoction?

This method allows the practitioner maximum flexibility in writing a prescription. They can put in just what is necessary in just the right amounts. The formula can be changed even on a daily basis if necessary and decoctions tend to be more potent than other means of administration.

Why do the herbal decoctions taste so bad?

Chinese herbal teas tend to taste bitter because they are made mostly from roots and barks where the strongest medicinal ingredients are found. But formulas are made for the individual's condition. Some are sour, some are sweeter, and have different tastes. After a time, the patient may come to crave the taste, even if it is not a good-tasting tea. This shows that the medicine is working and the body knows what it needs!