

Chronic Fatigue and Chinese Medicine

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Chronic Fatigue Immune Dysfunction Syndrome (CFIDS) appears to be a cluster of related diseases that produces severe and persisting fatigue as a main symptom. In addition, other signs such as mild fever, sore throat, painful lymph nodes, muscle weakness, muscle pain, headache, joint pain and insomnia may also be present. CFIDS mainly affects women (75-80% of the cases), with the greater incidence in the age range of 25-40 years. They are usually young, highly active, affluent professionals.

Triggers

There are currently four factors that are considered triggers for CFIDS:

1. Severe emotional stress or chronic depression - these seem to depress the immune system.
2. Chronic digestive system stress - due to poor diet and erratic eating habits - leads to the development of food sensitivities and allergies as well as intestinal dysbiosis (leaky gut syndrome).
3. Environmental factors - exposure to pollutants, heavy metals, chemicals, pesticides, lead poisoning, and cleaning chemicals, as well as ultraviolet light exposure.
4. Overwork and under exercise - excessive mental work under chronic deadlines can cause adrenal stress which leads to reduced amounts of cortisol can cause exhaustion and fatigue.

TCM Understanding

The most common presentation of CFIDS in terms of Traditional Chinese Medicine is deficiency of the Spleen qi with Dampness, and Kidney exhaustion. In addition to fatigue, Spleen qi deficiency symptoms manifest as digestive symptoms such as bloating and flatulence. Because it is heavy, Dampness can accumulate in the lower abdomen and may result in persistent vaginal or urinary tract infections. The composting dampness can produce Heat, which rises and agitates the Heart, which accounts for insomnia and depression. Kidney exhaustion may produce backaches, day or night sweats, low grade fevers, and exhaustion.

Treatment

Acupuncture in the treatment of CFIDS is invariably effective, because it can help to stimulate the immune system, which is depressed. The extent to which energetic blockage is the cause or effect of the disease is the extent to which the person may be helped. Digestive function can be stimulated, dampness dispersed, kidney deficiency strengthened, and the heart peacened with acupuncture.

Herbal treatment can assist in the treatment of CFIDS by using powerful combinations of herbs renowned for their anti-viral, stagnation relieving, and kidney tonic effects. Herbs that help to calm agitation, vitalize blood circulation, clear deficiency heat (fever) may also be employed.

There is also a wide constellation of naturopathic treatments to consider in a team approach to treatment. These include vitamins and minerals, anti-oxidants, hormones, and glandulars. Specific treatment protocols may be supplied by a naturopathic physician.

A holistic approach to the treatment of CFIDS demands the full co-operation of the patient as well as a commitment to treating the whole person in a multi-level treatment strategy. Dietary intervention (elimination of food sensitivities, caffeine, alcohol, and refined sugars), exercise, counseling (to deal with the psychological effects of long-term illness), bodywork (massage, to increase blood circulation and move the qi), are other approaches that complete the treatment of CFIDS, and are integral, because of the intensity of this disease.

New Research

Recent studies have indicated that CFIDS may be associated with hypotension (low blood pressure) and that its symptoms may be improved by therapy directed at this abnormal cardiovascular reflex. This may explain why sufferers of CFIDS are often relatively healthy young women who are physically active. While this research is encouraging, it should be considered in the context of the causes and treatments presented above.

This concludes our series on the treatment of immune disorders with TCM.