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Chinese Medicine and Cancer

Chinese Medicine is a system dating back several thousand years. Many people consider Chinese Medicine their first line of defense in maintaining health and combating disease. Although acupuncture has captured our attention in the US, traditional herbal medicine plays a greater role in the Chinese health care system.

Cancer is a leading cause of death in China and the United States. Conventional western therapies such as surgery, radiation and chemotherapy are used in both countries to treat cancer. These treatments deplete the body's vital energy and often result in many side effects. In China, the routine use of Fu Zhen therapy, an immune enhancing regimen is common. Studies show that combining Chinese Medicine with conventional forms of cancer treatment help protect the body's immune system from damage and increase survival rate in cancer patients. Herbal formulas are also used to inhibit tumor growth.

In Chinese Medicine illness is an energy imbalance, an excess or deficiency of the vital substances. Qi or vital energy controls the body's working as it travels along the channels or meridians. A person is healthy when there is a balanced, sufficient flow of qi, which keeps the blood and body fluids circulating and fighting disease. If qi is blocked for any reason or is excessive or deficient, disease may result. The flow of energy may be disrupted by an imbalanced diet or lifestyle, overwork, stress, repressed or excessive emotions, lack of exercise, external pathogenic factors, etc.

Cancer like other diseases is a manifestation of imbalance or disharmony in the body. The tumor is the branch not the root of the illness. Each patient may have a different imbalance causing what outwardly looks like the same type of cancer. The Chinese medicine practitioner determines the individual's pattern of disharmony rather than a condition such as breast cancer or colon cancer. The prescribed treatment depends on the individual's specific imbalance. The diagnosis is made in terms of yin or yang, qi, blood or organ imbalance. Once the pattern of disharmony is identified a treatment plan is formulated to restore balance.

Causes of cancer according to Chinese Medicine

1. Qi ó when qi or energy stagnates (does not move smoothly) over a long period of time it may result in a cancerous mass or tumor. Stagnation of qi and blood is the most common cause of cancer according to Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) theory.
2. Blood ó stagnation of qi will lead to the stagnation of blood. Blood is the mother of qi and qi is the commander of blood.
3. Phlegm and damp ó are often a result of qi or energy deficiency. They are considered sticky or turbid and can block or obstruct the flow of qi.
4. Toxin
5. Dysfunction of internal organs

Etiology of disease according to TCM:

1. Emotions: Negative or excessive emotions that accumulate over time will cause deficiency of qi that leads to the stagnation of qi and blood. This imbalance over time leads to disease that may include cancer. Each organ has specific emotions that will cause disharmony or dysfunction. For example, excess joy impairs the heart; fear damages the kidney; anger, irritability, stress and depression impair the liver, anxiety and worry weaken the spleen and sadness and grief impair the lung. If sudden, violent, or chronic emotional stimuli affect your body beyond its ability to adapt, they will cause a functional disorder of a specific organ or its qi.
2. Improper diet: Injury to spleen and stomach is caused by overeating, poor nutrition, and dieting. This results in qi deficiency.
3. Mental or physical overstrain for long periods of time will deplete the body's vital substances and make our body more susceptible to pathogenic influences.
4. Deficiency of qi and blood due to aging.
5. External pathogenic factors.

Principles of treatment

1. Strengthen the body's vital energy to attack cancer (Improve the body's resistance or immune response)
 - a. Regulate the flow of qi and blood
 - b. Invigorate the spleen and stomach
 - c. Nourish liver and kidney
2. Disperse the evil and eliminate and remove the toxin
 - a. Regulate qi and nourish blood to remove stagnation.
 - b. Remove obstruction from meridians or channels.
 - c. Resolve phlegm and damp
 - d. Disintegrate the hard masses and resolve lymph node enlargement.
 - e. Clear toxin and alleviate pain.
3. Alleviate the side effects that result from treatment or the cancer and fatigue, decreased WBC, RBC, platelets, nausea and vomiting, night sweats, mouth ulcers, bleeding symptoms, etc.

Components of Chinese Medicine that are useful include: Chinese herbs, acupuncture, food therapy, Qi Gong or Tai Chi. Chinese herbs used in the treatment of cancer fall into three broad categories. Tonic herbs increase the body's energy and immune response. Toxin clearing herbs are used to attack the tumor. Blood activating herbs improve circulation of vital substances. Herbal therapy can improve appetite, reduce nausea and vomiting, and alleviate stress for example.

TCM believes that it is possible to control the progression of health problems or fix them at all stages of disease. The earlier imbalances are recognized the easier and more quickly they can be corrected. It requires the active participation of you to get the best results.

Recommended Reading: A Woman's Guide to Healing From Breast Cancer by Nan Lu, OMD, LAc