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Endometriosis and Chinese Medicine

By Leslie Oldershaw, Licensed Acupuncturist

The Western description of endometriosis includes patterns that have been recognized in Chinese medicine for millennia. Symptoms including painful periods, pelvic pain in between periods, heavy menstrual flow, and infertility have a long history of being successfully treated by practitioners of Chinese medicine. Chinese medicine diagnoses these symptoms according to holistic theories of physiology, and then provides effective treatment with acupuncture, herbs, nutrition and lifestyle counseling. Using Chinese medicine, women can experience relief from the symptoms of endometriosis, and many have gone on to achieve a successful pregnancy.

The Chinese medical practitioner, or acupuncturist, views the body as being traversed by a network of channels very much like the circulatory system described in Western medicine. These channels are contiguous and follow very specific pathways. They carry our blood and vital energy, or qi (pronounced “chee”), to all the organs and tissues of our body, providing warmth and nourishment. Ideally, blood and energy circulate freely throughout the system. Any blockage or reduction in flow creates a condition known as stagnation. In women, this stagnation can lead to symptoms such as painful periods, pelvic pain, and heavy bleeding. Chinese medicine considers stagnation of vital energy and blood as the primary cause of endometriosis.

One main cause of stagnation in the lower abdomen is cold. Cold temperatures inhibit proper circulation of vital energy and blood, resulting in a physical environment which promotes endometriosis.

The two greatest sources of cold are climate and diet. Women often go out in cold weather without being warmly dressed, commonly exposing the legs, neck and head to a chill. This translates to a cooling of the entire system, in the same way a radiator works to cool down a car engine. Diet is another significant source of coldness. Consumption of cold foods and beverages cools down the abdomen, slowing the circulation of blood and energy, and creating conditions of stagnation that can lead to the symptoms of endometriosis. In order to relieve such symptoms as painful periods, it is of paramount importance to emphasize warm foods and beverages, and to avoid all cold foods and beverages.

Physical trauma and emotional stress can also play key roles in women’s reproductive health. Physical trauma, such as pelvic surgery, can interrupt the proper flow of blood and energy through the abdomen, leading to stagnation. Following a surgery, acupuncture and herbs help the body heal itself quickly, minimizing or eliminating scar tissue, another potential cause of stagnation. For example, when we experience stress, we feel tense and our neck muscles tighten

up. Though we might only feel the sensation in the neck muscles this tightening is occurring throughout the body, effectively constricting energy and blood flow. Over time, chronic stress leads to stagnation and pain. A combination of acupuncture, herbs, nutrition, and lifestyle adjustments will restore proper circulation of blood and energy.

In addition, regular physical activity plays a key role in promoting the circulation of energy and blood. A sedentary lifestyle can contribute to stagnation and the symptoms of endometriosis.

Regular exercise is an integral part of the Chinese medical prescription for removing stagnation, thereby promoting overall health and most importantly, a healthy reproductive system.

Chinese medicine is a truly holistic system of medicine, and both diagnosis and treatment take into account a patient's physiology, past and present symptoms, and lifestyle. The treatment plan is a comprehensive customized protocol, addressing the patient's presenting symptoms and underlying constitutional imbalances that are the root of those symptoms. Also included in any treatment plan are lifestyle considerations, such as recommendations for stress management, adequate rest, and regular exercise.

The Chinese medical practitioner draws on both ancient and modern knowledge in treating endometriosis. The Chinese medical theories and methods of treatment have been refined over a few thousand years, and today, we are fortunate to benefit from the many gifts of this great legacy.