

# What is Traditional Chinese Medicine?

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM for short) is a system of healing with a history that goes back over 3000 years. Since its early developments until now, it has been continuously practiced, resulting in centuries of clinical experience and evolution. Since the 1950's TCM has begun to receive modern scientific study and recognition. In China it is integrated into hospitals and universities alongside Western Medicine and the World Health Organization recognises its effectiveness for a wide range of different conditions.

## ② **Illness & Health according to TCM**

Adopting Taoist concepts of Yin and Yang, TCM sees health as a harmonious balance of mind and body with their surroundings and illness as an imbalance in one or several of these areas. Its emphasis on inter-relationships is similar to the modern concept of homeostasis in the study of physiology. The mind and body interact and affect one another and in turn are affected by our surroundings. In addition, natural cycles such as day and night, the annual seasons, birth, maturation and aging are all included in TCM's understanding of health.

Developed before the invention of x-rays, blood tests and other methods of looking into the body, the practice of TCM utilises all of the details visible on the exterior of the body (for example, the location of pain, complexion of the face, what makes a condition better or worse, etc.) to determine what is happening on the inside.

## ② **Metaphors and Meridians**

In its descriptions of health and disease, TCM uses a metaphorical language. For example, a cold or a flu is described as a kind of "Wind" that invades the superficial layer of the body. It is like wind because it comes and goes quickly and can change rapidly. Using these metaphors, ancient practitioners developed treatments to address a wide variety of conditions. For the example of a superficial invasion of Wind, treatment would focus on expelling the Wind, and then strengthening the body's resistance to prevent future invasions.

Similarly, in the use of acupuncture, ancient practitioners used the concept of meridians – channels of running along the body – to describe both the local effects that can be obtained from needling a specific point as well as the widespread beneficial effects

This emphasis on external signs in TCM means that it never loses sight of the whole person. For example, when TCM looks at irritable bowel syndrome, the focus is not only on inflammation in the gastrointestinal tract. TCM also considers a person's diet, stress levels, energy levels and many other factors to arrive at a picture of the condition in relation to the person as a whole at that point in time.

The use of colorful and metaphorical language can make a TCM diagnosis hard to understand. For example, "Kidney Yin deficiency" or "Wood invading Earth" in the context of TCM each have specific meanings and point to particular treatment approaches to correct an imbalance. In fact, one of the most common areas of misunderstanding is from the names of organs such as Liver or Spleen used in TCM diagnosis.

Keep in mind that a TCM diagnosis is distinct from a Western Medicine diagnosis. When your practitioner refers to an organ such as the Heart or the Lung, this refers not only the anatomical structure, but also a whole network of inter-relationships. Some practitioners prefer to talk about organ networks to avoid this confusion. So when your practitioner talks about the liver or kidney, the meaning is likely different from when your physician uses the same words.



### **What to expect during a visit**

During your first visit, your practitioner will ask you many questions. Don't be surprised if some of the questions don't sound directly related to your condition. Remember, your overall health as well as your current ailments are important to a TCM practitioner.



### **Pulse & Tongue Examination**

Taking your pulse and examining your tongue are two important diagnostic techniques that can tell a lot about what is happening inside you. These are often used in TCM to arrive at a treatment plan. Your pulse is typically taken on both wrists. A practitioner is feeling for not only for the speed of the pulse, but also its depth, evenness and quality. All of these subtle characteristics say something different about you. Similarly, when a practitioner looks at your tongue, they are interested in many different features of the tongue, from its colour and shape to the presence or absence of a coating. It's a good idea not to brush your teeth, smoke, eat or drink anything just before an appointment, because these will change the state of your tongue.

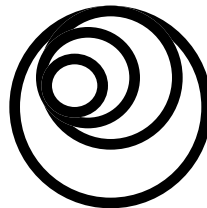
In order to treat a condition, TCM makes use of a range of treatment options, often in combination. This allows your practitioner to modify a treatment according to your needs or integrate several different treatments together. The most common treatments provided are acupuncture and herbal prescriptions. These treatment methods are described more fully in another factsheet in this series.

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### **Disclaimer**

*This factsheet is not intended to treat, diagnose or prescribe. The information provided is not to be considered a substitute for consultation with a qualified health care practitioner.*

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