

An Effective Supplemental Therapy for Cancer

For several decades, cancer has been the leading cause of death worldwide. The predominant therapy for cancer is conventional treatment, including surgery, chemotherapy and radiotherapy. In China, most patients accept Chinese herbal medicine as supplemental therapy for cancer treatment. Herbal medicine has its own advantages, such as enhancing therapeutic effects and reducing side effects of conventional treatments, regulating immune function, relieving symptoms, improving quality of life, and prolonging life.

The roles of Chinese Herbal Medicine in treating Cancer

In most cases, Chinese herbal medicine plays an adjunct role in comprehensive cancer treatment. It can support other Western or conventional treatments to enhance therapeutic effects and reduce side effects.

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) teaches that chemotherapy may injure the upright *qi* of the human body, causing marrow inhibition, low immunity and gastrointestinal reactions. Some herbs can protect the lowering of blood cells after chemotherapy and improve side effects such as tiredness, listlessness, palpitation, insomnia, numbness of hands, and hair loss. Others can prevent and ameliorate digestive system reactions to improve appetite, and reduce nausea and vomiting after chemotherapy treatments. Some herbs can prevent myocardium impairment. Proper application of herbs can reduce dry mouth and throat caused by radiotherapy, alleviate cough and help reduce the dysfunction of ventilation caused by radiation pneumonia. Combinations of herbs are used before and after surgery to improve patient constitution and promote recovery. In some conditions, because patients can't accept conventional treatments, such as in advanced stages of cancers, and senior patients who cannot stand traumatic treatments, herbs can help improve quality of life and relieve symptoms. Herbal medicine also treats precancerous diseases such as liver cirrhosis, atrophic gastritis, and peptic ulcers. These treatments may effectively reduce and prevent the progression to cancer.

Basic treatment methods and common herbs

Cancer is the local manifestation of general disease. We have two basic treatment methods: tonifying and reducing. Tonifying upright *qi* and cultivating the root, is the primary principle of treating cancer, which also includes tonifying *yang*, and nourishing blood and *yin*. Reducing methods include clearing heat and relieving toxicity, invigorating blood and expelling stasis, transforming phlegm and dissipating nodules, and attacking toxins.

The tonifying method is commonly used in all types of middle and late stages of cancers. It boosts the patient's innate ability to fight disease, both physically and mentally and promotes recovery after traumatic treatments. *Qi*-tonifying herbs include *ren shen*, *dang shen*, *huang qi*, *bai zhu* and *shan yao*. Blood-nourishing blood herbs include *dang gui*, *shu di huang*, *bai shao*, *e jiao* and *ji xue teng*. *Yin*-nourishing herbs include *tian men dong*, *mai men dong*, *sha shen*, *han lian zao* and *nu zhen zi*. *Yang*-tonifying herbs include *fu zi*, *rou gui*, *yin yang huo*, *bu gu zhi*, *tu si zi*, *rou cong rong* and *ba ji tian*. Some of these herbs are hot and dry in nature, and some are sticky in nature. When

a patient's constitution is too weak, sometimes they might have such reactions as abdominal distention, reduced appetite, constipation and dry mouth after taking the herbs. So when we use this category of herbs, we can add some others to promote *qi* movement and strengthen the spleen, such as *chen pi* or *sha ren*.

Heat toxins are one of common causes of cancer in TCM theory. Heat can condense the blood and dry up body fluid to form phlegm. Blood stasis, phlegm and heat then accumulate in the body, and block the channels and organs to form the cancer. Herbs commonly used to clear heat and relieve toxicity in the treatment of cancer include *bai hua she she cao*, *pu gong ying*, *ban zhi lian*, *ban bian lian*, *zao xiu*, *jin yin hua*, *ban lan gen*, *shan dou gen*, *chuan xin lian*, *dong ling cao*, *ku shen*, *zi cao gen* and *qing dai*. These herbs are cold in nature, so if patients already have a *yang* deficiency with manifestation of a cold sensation or diarrhea, this category of herbs is not suitable.

According to classic TCM theory, normal circulation of *qi* and blood is the key to keeping healthy. *Qi* stagnation and blood stasis is another kind of pathogenic cause of cancer. Blood stasis is, in fact, both a cause and a pathogenic result during the process of cancer, so it is necessary to regulate *qi* and invigorate the blood, which also helps to relieve pain for patients. *Qi*-regulating herbs include *xiang fu*, *chen pi*, *qing pi*, *zhi shi*, *zhi ke*, *ba yue zha*, *hou po* and *chuan lian zi*. Blood-invigorating herbs include *dan shen*, *wu ling zhi*, *tao ren*, *hong hua*, *chi shao*, *san leng*, *e shu*, *ru xiang*, *mo yao* and *pu huang*.

In TCM theory, phlegm is also both a cause and a pathogenic product during the process of cancer, so the group of herbs that can transform phlegm and dissipate nodules is also very commonly used in clinical practice. This class of herbs includes *ban xia*, *tian nan xing*, *bei mu*, *zao jiao ci*, *yi yi ren*, *gua lou*, *xia ku cao*, *huang yao zi*, *hai zao*, *kun bu*, *mu li*, *gui ban*, *bie jia*, *teng li gen* and *shan ci gu*.

Cancer can cause so much damage to the body because of toxins. According to TCM theory, one method of attacking internal toxins is by actually using toxic herbs. This class of herbs with the ability to attack toxicity include *ban mao*, *lu feng fang*, *quan xie*, *shui zhi*, *wu gong*, *chan chu*, *sheng fu zi*, *sheng ban xia*, *sheng nan xing*, *wu tou*, *da ji*, *yuan hua* and *nao sha*. Because this group of herbs is itself very toxic, we need to be very cautious when we use them.

Cautions in treating Cancer

Although natural herbs are relatively safer than synthesized chemical drugs, they are not absolutely safe. We should be very cautious. Emphasize prescribing formulas based on correct cancer-syndrome differentiation. Because of the other characteristics of traditional Chinese medicine, treatments are based on syndrome differentiation. We cannot pursue good therapeutic effects by simply putting all the herbs together based on their active ingredients, as discovered by modern research results. Patients need individualized treatment. These are some problems we want to avoid:

Avoid abuse of tonic herbs. For example, many patients asked the same question: "May I use ginseng to tonify myself?" That means everybody knows cancer patients are very weak and deficient, but not every patient has a deficient condition. Patients that are not necessarily *qi*-deficient need not use *ren shen*. So abuse of tonifying herbs needs to be avoided if their condition doesn't call for that.

Be cautious when using blood-invigorating herbs. Even though the blood-invigorating method is very popular in treating cancer, we still need to be very cautious, especially for those patients who have dysfunctions with blood coagulation or bleeding tendencies.

Don't always advocate using toxic herbs. This is especially true with patients soon after chemotherapy or radiotherapy when their bodies are very weak, and their important organs, such as liver and kidneys, are very likely to be damaged.

Finally, cancer treatment should be performed according to the principle of human-oriented, instead of cancer-oriented, medicine. According to TCM's characteristics, we should focus on the general condition of the whole patient, so we don't just kill cancer cells and destroy cancer tissue and then forget the rest of the patient. Improving quality of life and prolonging the life span should be the aim when treating cancer. Improvement of patients' physical, mental and social life should be considered when we evaluate patients. TCM treats patients as an organic whole. We don't only treat cancer by itself.

FEBRUARY 2010