

MENOPAUSE & CHINESE MEDICINE



By Linda Joy Stone, OMD, L.Ac., Dipl. Ac.
(Written for the book, *The Moon in Your Life—
Being a Lunar Type in a Solar World*, by Donna Cunningham)

According to Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), women have seven-year cycles—like the phases of the progressed moon—culminating in menopause around age 49 (7 x 7). The functions of the spleen (digestion) and kidneys are responsible for blood and energy creation. The kidney system is like the pilot light of the body and dissipates as we age, as do the digestive functions. An early menopause is not considered healthy, nor is a too late one.

Menopause serves as a natural homeostatic mechanism. While we view it as a sign of aging, it actually slows the aging process. By losing blood in menstruation beyond age 49, one could actually lose too much vital essence and could experience weakness. With the cessation of menstruation, the essence lost monthly can be consolidated and contained, and women can maintain vibrant health for many more years. Continuing to bleed after age 49, as women on estrogen replacement therapy may do, could deplete the blood and Qi (vital energy).

You need healthy, strong Qi to move the blood and sufficient, strong blood to lubricate and nourish the body and mind. Qi (being Yang and active), and blood (being Yin and fluid) are reciprocal in nature and reinforce each other's function. With Qi or blood deficiency, symptoms include weakness, fatigue, dizziness or anemia. Yin depletion (of blood, substance or moisture) can cause yang functions to become erratic and flare up, creating headaches, hot flashes, night sweats, vaginal and skin dryness, insomnia or irritability.

In Chinese medicine the Liver rules the psychospiritual nature and is affected by anger, specifically suppressed anger. The liver is responsible for storing and moving the blood and Qi smoothly throughout the body. If there is any stagnation or constraint of the liver Qi, often due to stress or emotional problems, then spasms, migraines, tendinitis, hypertension or depression can result. The liver is also responsible for the regularity, volume and flow of the menses. Anything that disrupts the smooth flow of liver energy is likely to have a negative impact on menstruation and menopause.

TCM recognizes that lifestyle has a significant influence on whether a woman will have a difficult menopause or not. A woman with a long-standing pattern of anxiety, depression, stress, poor diet, addictions and overwork is more predisposed to a difficult menopause (or difficult menstrual periods) than someone who leads a more balanced and moderate lifestyle.

Unfortunately, we live in a hectic society that doesn't lend itself to balance and harmony. We eat irregularly, experience stress, don't allow for enough rest and exercise and run on empty a lot. Chronic fatigue is one result and so is a difficult menopause. The good news is that acupuncture can be very effective at relieving the physical and emotional symptoms of menopause by soothing the liver Qi, strengthening spleen and kidney functions and calming the mind and spirit.

Chinese herbs can be an excellent adjunct to treating menopausal symptoms. However, the diagnosis and prescription of these herbs has to be done on an individual basis, according to the health pattern presented. One might take a specific formula for a limited time to alleviate major symptoms of excess and stagnation. Then a long-term, nourishing formula may be added to specifically address the root cause of deficiency. Deficiency and excess patterns can appear simultaneously. Therefore, deficiencies must be strengthened and excesses sedated, which acupuncture and/or an herbal combination can address. Chinese herbs are used according to their energetic properties such as being hot/warm, cool/cold, neutral, pungent, sweet and bitter. A typical formula would usually contain a combination of these properties, some being more warming, others more cooling. If a woman presents with night sweats or hot flashes and mistakenly takes herbs that are too warming, such as Korean ginseng, her symptoms could be exacerbated. For that reason, it is not recommended to take a list of likely herbs on your own without having reasonable knowledge of their properties and side effects. It's best to consult a licensed practitioner.

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Recommended Reading:

- *The Wisdom of Menopause*, by Christiane Northrup, M.D.
- *Second Spring, A Guide to Healthy Menopause Through Traditional Chinese Medicine* by Honora Lee Wolfe
- *Staying Healthy with the Seasons*, by Elson Haas, M.D.
- *Voices of Qi—An Introductory Guide to Traditional Chinese Medicine*, by Alex Holland, M.Ac., L.Ac.
- *Healing with Whole Foods*, by Paul Pitchford