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OF TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE

SAINT PAUL, MN, USA

The Role of the Spleen in Traditional Chinese Medicine

By: Dr. Zhuoling Ren, T.C.M.D.,L.A.c.
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As we enter “Long Summer” from mid-July until the end of August, it is important to be mindful of your spleen. Unlike Western anatomy, the spleen is a very important organ in the traditional Chinese medical system. The definition of the spleen is not the same as it is in Western medicine. The spleen and stomach in traditional Chinese medicine represent the digestive system. The spleen plays an essential role involving the transportation and transformation of nutrients, control of blood flow, and responsibility for anxiety. The spleen also is related with the muscles.

Traditional Chinese medicine explains that the stomach digests the intake of food, and then the nutrients are transported and transformed by the spleen to all parts of the body. These nutrients are used for production of Qi-blood and body fluids. It fulfills a nourishing and moistening role.

Normal functioning of the spleen can prevent body fluids from accumulating. Whereas, a dysfunction of the spleen in transporting and transforming will lead to stagnation of the body fluids and cause dampness, water retention and phlegm. The nutrients instead of creating energy for body use, become a burden to the body. Excessive intake of cold drinks and raw or ripe fruit, and cold and damp living conditions, can lead to the formation of dampness phlegm pathogens. Excessive intake of fatty, sweet and greasy food also can cause dampness and phlegm.

The spleen has its specific emotions in anxiety. Moderate anxiety causes little stress on the physiological functions of the organs. However, too much anxiety may disturb the proper function of the spleen. The spleen will be deficient in its ability to transport, transform and send up nutrients. This can result in the stagnation and depression of Qi.

The spleen and stomach are the source of growth and development of Qi-blood. Muscles rely on the supply of nutrients from food transported by the spleen and stomach for their development and strength. Therefore, the development of the body’s muscles is directly related to the function of the spleen. If the spleen fails to function properly, muscles can become emaciated, weak and even paralyzed.

From the view of the spleen physiology and pathology, many difficult conditions can be successfully treated by traditional Chinese medicine.