



Hepatitis C Virus EASTERN TREATMENT OPTIONS

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CHINESE TRADITIONAL MEDICINE FOR HCV

Many people with hepatitis C virus (HCV) are turning to Chinese traditional medicine for treatment. Chinese traditional medicine has a rich history in the treatment of *chronic hepatitis*. *Hepatitis B* and *C* infections are prevalent throughout China, accounting for the increased risk of *hepatocellular carcinoma* in the Chinese population. The Chinese medical system has been dedicated to solving these problems for many years. The Chinese are working to eliminate sources of hepatitis, and to develop treatments for chronic viral hepatitis using both Chinese traditional medicine and western medicine.

At the International Symposium on Viral Hepatitis and AIDS held in Beijing, China in April 1991, more than 100 papers on viral hepatitis were presented. Several of these papers documented the positive results of studies involving Chinese herbal medicine. Studies on the use of herbal antivirals, and blood cooling and circulating herbs for liver damage repair were presented. These studies corroborated hundreds of years of treatment experience with Chinese herbs for the symptoms of hepatitis. (1, 2, 3)

A 1995 literature review revealed there are at least 55 herbal formulas that can be used to treat hepatitis.(4) Some recent herbal studies from China and Australia showed positive results in hepatitis C using herbal formulas similar to those widely used in the United States. (5, 6, 7)

In the United States, Chinese traditional medicine is a popular *complementary and alternative medicine (CAM)* therapy among patients with chronic liver disease. Anecdotal reports from one of the largest Western medicine *hepatology* practices in San Francisco suggest that at least 20-30% of patients report use of Chinese traditional medicine herbs for hepatitis.(8) The actual use of Chinese traditional medicine may be underestimated because patients often choose not to divulge the use of CAM therapies to their western health care providers.

Chinese traditional medicine uses nutrition, acupuncture, heat therapies (such as moxibustion), exercise, massage, meditation, and herbal medicine to treat people infected with HCV. *Protocols* have been developed that have successfully helped people infected with HCV decrease *symptoms*, normalize or lower *liver enzymes*, and slow the progression of liver disease. A 1995 pilot study conducted among people co-infected with HIV and viral hepatitis (B

and C) at San Francisco's Quan Yin Healing Arts Center indicated acupuncture alone may have an effect in lowering and/or normalizing liver enzyme levels.(9)

Chinese Medicine Philosophy

The primary goal of Chinese medicine is to create wholeness and harmony within a person thereby allowing the mind, body, and spirit to self-heal themselves. Chinese philosophy states that there are two opposing principles of life: *yin* and *yang*. Imbalances between *yin* and *yang* within a person can manifest as illness because the body is considered a micro-cosm of the world.

Chinese traditional medicine defines the physiological components of illness using the concepts of *qi* (vital energy), *xue* (blood), *jīn-yē* (body fluids), *jīng* (essence), *shen* (spirit), and organ systems. Organ systems are domains within the body that govern particular body tissues, emotional states, and activities.

Chinese traditional medicine theory states the key to health is the internal ability of the body to remain strong. According to this theory, people are born with a certain amount of original *qi* (pronounced "chee"). The *qi* is easily depleted as energy is used by the body and not replaced. It is not easy to increase the original *qi*. A person must work hard during life just to retain it. Exercise such as tai chi and *Qi gong*, healthy eating, and good sleeping habits are highly recommended for maintaining the original *qi*. If a person consistently lacks sleep, does not have a healthy diet, abuses drugs or alcohol, and/or has excessive or unsafe sex, he or she becomes *qi* deficient. When weakened and *qi* deficient, a person is more susceptible to infection by harmful external pathogenic elements.

Chinese Traditional Medicine Diagnoses for HCV

According to Chinese traditional medicine literature, people in China have experienced the various syndromes associated with HCV infection for over 2000 years. This is because Chinese traditional medicine diagnoses are based on symptoms, not on detection of *antibodies* to a specific virus. Chinese traditional medicine treatments for these syndromes have been used over the past millennia and are generally considered safe and effective for all patients. However, Chinese traditional medicine recognizes that each person has a unique constitution and pattern of disease that exists in conjunction with the age-old syndromes. Chinese traditional medicine contends that the best form of treatment is to modify, alter, or supplement the base therapies to create an individualized treatment that meets each patient's unique characteristics and needs.

Chinese medical theory states that viral hepatitis is not singular diseases, but are combinations of *stages* and syndromes. The diagnosis and staging of HCV are accomplished using tongue diagnosis, pulse diagnosis, and questioning according to Chinese traditional medicine theory.

According to Chinese traditional medicine, in HCV infections *toxic heat* enters the body. Manifestations of an invasion of heat include feelings of warmth, sweating, agitation, hot

sensations, and itching skin. Examination may reveal a fast pulse and a red tongue. Small red spots on the tongue are a likely finding in nearly all cases of chronic infection ranging from very obvious to barely noticeable.

The organ systems primarily disturbed in hepatitis are the liver and spleen organ systems. These disturbed organ systems affect digestion and energy. According to Chinese traditional medicine, acute viral hepatitis is generally associated with excess damp heat or damp cold conditions. While some people acutely infected with HCV may have or notice symptoms, this is relatively rare. The Chinese traditional medicine stage at which one is diagnosed with hepatitis C is usually either the chronic stage of *qi* stagnation, or the stage of *qi* and *yin* deficiency. Advanced chronic disease includes development of the patterns of *xue* stagnation and *xue* deficiency. All HCV infection is associated with toxic heat or the *li qi* (the pestilence/epidemic factor).

Traditional Chinese Medicine Therapy for HCV

In Western medicine, extremely harmful external elements include severe bacterial or viral infections such as HIV and HCV. However, those terms are inappropriate in Chinese traditional medicine. Instead, it is said Chinese medicine "recognizes the existence of Pestilences called *li qi* or *yi qi*. These are diseases that are not caused by the climatic factors of Heat, Cold, Wind, Dampness, or Summer Heat dryness, but by external infectious agents that are severely *toxic* because they strike directly at the interior of the body...(10).

In the case of HCV and/or HIV, the particular pestilence is identified as toxic heat. Toxic heat is considered by Chinese traditional medicine to be both an epidemic factor (something that is seen in a number of patients) and its own individual, treatable syndrome.

The various modalities of Chinese traditional medicine therapy include diet, massage, heat therapies, exercise, meditation, and acupuncture.

Heat therapies include the use of moxibustion. Moxibustion is the burning of the herb mugwort over certain areas of the body to stimulate or warm these areas. Also heated packs, often with herbs inside, are used in Chinese traditional medicine therapy

Exercise therapy ranges from martial arts to more subtle forms of movement such as tai chi and Qi gong. Many centers of Chinese traditional medicine include *Qi gong* or *tai chi* classes as part of their treatment programs

Acupuncture is perhaps the most well known form of Chinese traditional medicine in the United States. It is the art of inserting fine, sterile, metal filiform needles into acupuncture points on the body in order to control the flow of energy. Acupuncture therapy can include electrostimulation and/or hand stimulation. This form of therapy is most appreciated for its ability to relieve pain. However, acupuncture is also able to help change body energy patterns, which promotes the body's ability to heal itself of organic syndromes and symptoms. In these treatments, Chinese traditional medicine often does not distinguish energetic effects from physiologic effects.

The different modalities of Chinese traditional medicine have different aims. Some focus on balancing the body's energy, while others focus on building the physical body and adding substances to both balance and change the body materially. For example, the Enhance® herbal preparation that is widely used in HIV and HCV contains herbs to tonify the spleen *qi*, and build *xue*. *Qi* tonification increases the amount of energy in the body that is available for certain functions. *Qi* tonic herbs often have the specific effect of increasing digestion and food absorption. This increases the quality of the blood (*xue*).

Acupuncture is associated with balancing the body's energy levels, while herbal substances are more like drugs or food in that they have specific organic effects. Breathing exercises are known to strengthen *qi*. One meaning of the Chinese word *qi* is air. By learning how to breathe correctly, more oxygen becomes available to enter the bloodstream.

Chinese herbal medicine treatment for HCV depends on the stage of the disease and the syndromes involved. Herbal medications in conjunction with rest and dietary recommendations can treat the symptoms of *acute hepatitis* fairly rapidly. Chronic hepatitis C is more difficult to treat. Research and experience both from China and from Chinese traditional medicine clinics in the United States suggest that at least a one-year course of Chinese traditional medicine therapy is the minimum needed to alter the progression of HCV. In our clinics, Chinese traditional medicine therapy for chronic hepatitis C usually includes combinations of herbal preparations, which are often specifically designed for the disturbed organ system patterns.

COMBINING EASTERN AND WESTERN THERAPIES

If you decide to use a combination of eastern and western therapies, you must discuss all of your treatment approaches with both your eastern and western practitioners. The use of some herbal therapies in conjunction with *interferon therapy* may be inappropriate. However, Chinese medicine can be highly effective for the management of side effects from drug therapy. Chinese traditional medicine may also be used as an alternative to western drug therapy in some cases.

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