

5 Ways to Improve Your Heart Health, According to Chinese Medicine

The Heart According to TCM

The heart is one of the five *zang* organs, alongside the spleen, lung, kidney and liver. Also known as *yin* organs, they produce, store and regulate vital substances such as blood, bodily fluids and *qi*. The *zang* organs are believed to regulate the internal functions of the body.

Each *zang* organ is paired with a *fu* organ, or *yang* organ. *Yang* organs — which include the gall bladder, small intestine, stomach, large intestine, and bladder — help you digest food, absorb nutrients and dispose of bodily waste. In contrast to the *zang* organs, the *fu* organs perform external functions.

As a *zang* organ, the heart is paired with the small intestine, though the former plays bigger role in your body more generally. The *Shen Shi Zunsheng Shu* further describes the heart as “the root of life, the seat of *shen* [spirit], the master of blood, and the commander of the vessels. This elevated position is due to the omnipresence of *shen*: *shen* resides within *qi*, and *qi* resides within *jing*. Only the heart’s *jing* is always abundant, enabling it to dispatch subordinate *shens* to the other four *zang* organs. Only the heart’s *qi* is always abundant, enabling it to draw the *jing* of the body into the six *fu* organs.”

In other words, if you keep your heart healthy, your body will generally stay healthy as well. And if you take good care of the organs that take *qi* from, and offer *jing* to, the heart, your heart will be nourished and protected.

Unlike Western medicine, which views the organs as individual physical units, Chinese medicine views the organs as abstract, interrelated aspects of the vast network within your body. Following the yin-yang principle of balance, if any of your organs are diseased or not functioning as they should, at least one other organ will be affected as well.

The Heart, The *Shen* and Your Emotions

Shen is often translated as “mind” or “spirit,” though it’s a more complex concept than either of those words suggest. *Shen* is housed in the heart, and is thought to regulate your emotions, consciousness and other mental functions. Although the *shen* itself cannot be seen, its effects on your mind and body are obvious.

As the *Shen Shi Zunsheng Shu* mentions, the heart dispatches the *shen* to the other organs. Because the *shen* is so light, it requires the blood to hold it in place. Thus, the health of the *shen* depends on the health of the heart and blood, and vice versa.

When your *shen* is healthy, you are able to think clearly and rationally, feel calm and peaceful most of the time, and cultivate healthy relationships with other people. When the *shen* is disturbed, it manifests itself in symptoms such as poor concentration, memory loss, irritability, anxiety, insomnia, and other signs of mental and emotional disorders.

The Heart and the Tongue in TCM

Chinese physicians believe that the *jing* (essence) of the five *zang* organs is accessible through seven orifices. For example, the tongue is believed to be the orifice to the heart. If the heart is healthy, the tongue will be a healthy red color, and will not have any unusual cracks or lines. If the tongue is pale, dark

purple or has cracks on it, it could be a sign that your heart is out of balance in some way.

The Heart-Uterus Connection

The heart also has close connections with the reproductive system. In women, the heart is connected to the uterus via the *bao mai* (uterus vessel). If the *bao mai* is healthy, menstruation will be regular, and fertility will be high. If the *bao mai* is obstructed, the woman will experience reproductive issues such as amenorrhea, irregular menstruation and infertility.

Any imbalances in the heart, as well as the woman's *qi* and blood, can cause issues such as excessive bleeding during menstruation, and a difficult birth. Thus, the health of a woman's reproductive system is also dependent on the health of the heart.

How to Keep Your Heart Healthy, According to TCM

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, heart disease is the leading cause of death in North America. Some of the risk factors include inactivity, an unhealthy diet, smoking, inadequate or poor-quality sleep and uncontrolled stress.

Fortunately, each risk factor can be addressed according to the tenets of TCM. If you find it difficult to use the suggested solutions for any reason, we also suggest ways to stay motivated below.

Risk #1: Inactivity

Solution: Tai Chi, Qigong and Yoga

Stay Motivated: Do the above exercises with friends. Set a regular schedule for exercise, and stick to it. Alternate between the above to spice up your routine.

Risk #2: Unhealthy diet

Solution: According to TCM, red foods help nourish the heart by making up for the loss of *yang* or fire energy in the body. Some red foods include tomatoes, cherry, red beans, watermelon, apple, strawberries, beef, etc.

Stay Motivated: Look up creative ways to prepare red foods.

Risk #3: Smoking

Solution: Let people know that you plan to quit smoking, so that it's easier to stick to your resolution. You can also ask your herbalist for astragalus, which can help reduce the anxiety that comes with quitting smoking. Acupuncture can also be used to dramatically reduce cravings.

Stay motivated: If you're experiencing withdrawal symptoms, look to family and friends for support. Alternatively, join a local support group for former smokers.

Risk #4: Inadequate or poor-quality sleep

Solution: In TCM, poor sleep is caused by an imbalance in your *yin* and *yang* energies. Depending on your particular sleep problem, your TCM provider can give you a customized herbal formula tailored to your needs. Also, practice good sleep hygiene habits such as having a regular bedtime schedule, turning off your TV/computer/mobile devices before bed, making your bed and bedroom comfortable for sleep, etc. Certain acupuncture points can also be used to have a sedating effect on the body to help ensure a good nights sleep.

Stay motivated: Put a note on your fridge (or anywhere else that's more convenient) reminding you to practice good sleep habits. Do this until those habits second nature to you.

Risk #5: Uncontrolled stress

Solution: Practice tai chi, qigong and meditation. Get acupuncture to help downregulate an overstimulated sympathetic nervous system. Drink calming teas recommended by your herbalist. Take a deep breath before stressful thoughts overwhelm your mind.

Stay motivated: Don't beat yourself up for experiencing stress. Stress is your body's natural response to real and perceived threats. Stress only becomes harmful when you stay in "fight or flight" mode long after the threat has passed. Once the threat has passed, take a deep breath and repeat a mantra like "I'm okay" to yourself again and again. Also, remember to take a break, and to pat yourself on the back for making it out of a stressful situation in one piece.

This #HeartMonth, follow the tips above to keep your heart healthy according to traditional Chinese medicine (TCM). You may also contact Legge Health Clinic at 902-843-7475 for more information on nurturing a healthy heart.