

# Traditional Chinese Medicine and Diabetes

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- b) Reduction of dosages of Western medications.
  - c) Help prevent or eliminate the side-effects of medications.
  - d) Build patient's resistance to disease by strengthening immunity and promoting metabolism.
- (Flaws 2002, Chi-Shing Cho et al 2005)

## Can we get similar results in the West?

In China, the treatment protocols can be intensive and long-term. For example, three times a week or even daily for many months is not uncommon and can involve various aspects of Chinese medicine used simultaneously (such as acupuncture, combined with herbs, dietary advice and massage). In the West, treatment is often rationalised to a few weekly sessions, often not solely on medical grounds but due to the patient's finances, as most TCM is paid for privately. Despite these limitations (if this really is the case) good results can be achieved. Some authors suggest that treatment is most effective for mild to moderate Type 2 diabetes, and is most difficult where the patient is no longer secreting insulin, or following dietary or exercise advice (Choate 1999, Flaws 2002, Major 2007).

In a review of the treatment of diabetes by acupuncture during the last 40 years in China, Hui (1995) concluded acupuncture to be very effective in the treatment of complications associated with diabetes, with the exception of ketoacidosis.

## Blood sugar and insulin levels

Mayor (2007) has conducted extensive research compiling studies into the treatment of diabetes with electroacupuncture (where an electrical current is applied across two acupuncture points). He found that electroacupuncture has been shown to decrease blood sugar and increase insulin secretion in Type II diabetes. Furthermore, Mayor noted that regularly repeated moxibustion at particular points on the body may also increase insulin levels. Moxibustion is the application of heat using the herb *artemisia vulgaris*.

Disappointingly the evidence is not strong, and Mayor concluded that many clinical studies have investigated the consequences of diabetes rather than addressed the raised blood sugar levels that causes them. This is perhaps an



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area worthy of further study, as Choate (1998) found that research is strongly suggesting a causal link between the development of complications such as cerebrovascular disease, retinopathy, neuropathy, nephropathy and arteriosclerosis with raised blood sugar levels. With good blood sugar control research has shown that the risk of developing these complications can be reduced.

## Diabetic neuropathy

The most common complication of diabetes is diabetic neuropathy and most drugs used for this condition are associated with significant side-effects. Mayor (2007) reported a number of clinical trials and studies where positive outcomes resulted from acupuncture treatment. One study of 46 patients with chronic painful peripheral neuropathy showed that 77% noted significant improvements in their symptoms and 67% were able to stop or reduce their medications (Abuaishe et al 1998).

These positive results are unexplained from a Western medical view. There are various theories to how acupuncture works, but these remain speculative.

The causes of diabetes from a Chinese perspective are multiple and many mirror our Western understanding. Although the Chinese Medical classics were written more than 2000 years ago, they display uncanny accuracy and foresight. For example, they name dietary, emotional stress, inherited constitution and mental and physical over or under-activity, among other factors, as contributory to diabetes.

The giving of dietary advice by an acupuncturist, which reflects their understanding of the causes of disease for a particular patient, will perhaps be surprising to those seeking acupuncture treatment. Yet to some practitioners this is of utmost importance and can explain the increasing incidence of diabetes in Western countries and those countries starting to adopt Western diets. Bob Flaws, is a respected practitioner and published authority on TCM in the West. He suggests that the improper feeding of newborns and toddlers is a less obvious factor in the increasing incidence of diabetes. In Chinese medicine the digestive system takes a number of years to fully develop and mothers milk and cow's milk is considered relatively hard to digest (as is all dairy produce). Flaws says that feeding western babies on demand when they cry, can overload the immature digestive system leading to lifelong patterns of disharmony. He concludes, "to prevent growth of diabetes, we not only need to be careful of diet and lifestyle in adults but also need to reform our thinking about the feeding and health care of the very young".

## Chinese Dietary therapy

Chinese dietary therapy advice is customised to fit the pattern of disharmony presented by each patient. However there are particularly common patterns seen among Western diabetic patients, and typically advice is given on the following types of food:

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