

Question: I heard on the news recently that there was a study linking depression and breast cancer. Is that true?

Answer: Yes. According to an article in the *Asian Pacific Journal of Cancer Prevention*, a study conducted in Iran looked at 3000 women at a breast cancer screening clinic in Tehran. The study followed the women for two years. During that time, 243 women were diagnosed with some form of breast cancer. After allowing for other known risk factors, the researchers still found a “strong association between breast cancer and depression, anxiety, a feeling of hopelessness, and loss of interest and pleasure in life” (as cited in the October 2005 *Journal of Chinese Medicine*). Women suffering from depression were about twice as likely to develop breast cancer, even after allowing for other risk factors.

Now, the good news. One study does not constitute proof. The repeatability of a study constitutes a major factor in its acceptance by the scientific community. There are many questions we would need to answer about the initial study, and we would need to repeat the research and get comparable results before we accepted the results as being true, or even highly likely. Did the researchers control for diet, lifestyle, socio-economic status, availability of healthcare, and other factors when they controlled for risk factors such as a family predisposition to breast cancer? This is only one study, so don't be too alarmed. But it is worth taking seriously.

Interestingly, there are connections in Chinese Medicine between the underlying causes of depression and the underlying causes of various breast diseases. Both can be linked to the traditional Chinese Medical function of the liver. Keeping this in mind, we fall back on one of the basic principles of Traditional Chinese Medicine: prevention. Treat the depression before it causes further problems.

How can you treat depression? It depends on the severity of the problem. If depression interferes with your daily living, it is time to seek help from a qualified medical practitioner. But there are things you can do for yourself, as well. Begin by getting a moderate amount of exercise (of course, never start an exercise program until cleared by your health practitioner). Regular exercise helps release endorphins, your body's natural pain-killers and mood enhancers. Spend some time in the sunlight. There is a documented connection between getting enough sunlight and improving your mood. There are some countries in northern Europe which have clinics with special full-spectrum lights that are used specifically to provide extra imitation daylight during the winter months. Look for ways to laugh. That means going out of your way to rent a funny movie, or read a funny book, or go out to see a comedian. Laughing feels good for a reason – it decreases stress hormones and helps to improve your breathing patterns. And especially at this time of year, spend some time with friends.