

Question: How does Chinese Medicine treat high cholesterol?

Answer: High cholesterol almost always has a root in “internal dampness.” The language sounds odd...we probably expect our insides to be damp, right? But in this case, “internal dampness” refers more to an energetic quality of dampness. Long before Western Medicine was doing blood tests for HDL (“good” cholesterol) and LDL (“bad” cholesterol), Chinese Medicine counseled against the consumption of too much fatty food, too much fried food, and too much dairy. Why dairy? For one thing, there were no low fat dairy options hundreds of years ago; but even with low fat options, dairy has a tendency to produce internal dampness. Interestingly, dampness is said to obstruct the channels, or meridians, through which your Qi flows. And of course, modern research shows that having too much cholesterol in your bloodstream can lead to obstructed arteries.

We can treat dampness in two primary ways. We can drain dampness; and we can transform dampness. Remember that dampness can lead to any number of different problems. Although here we are concerned with a cholesterol problem, dampness may also be associated with arthritis, edema, epilepsy, and any number of other problems. For the type of dampness that typically presents in a Patient with high cholesterol, we will want to transform the dampness, as well as draining it. In this sort of presentation, there are usually signs of digestive difficulties, as well. They may or may not present obvious symptoms to the Patient, but there are almost always signs that the digestion is not working properly. We typically associate this with a Spleen Qi deficiency. Frequently, the Liver will also be involved, and due to Qi Stagnation, may be overacting on the Spleen.

So our treatment principles will be to harmonize the Liver and Spleen, transform and drain dampness. So we might start with a base formula like Xiao yao san (which contains the root of a white peony, and licorice, among other things) which is a harmonizing formula. Then we would add some herbs like Cang Zhu and Hou po to transform the dampness and improve digestion further. We might also add Fu ling to drain dampness. But we are not blind to Western research, so we might also add Shan zha (hawthorn berries). In Chinese Medicine, this herb helps relieve “food stagnation,” so it will also help with digestion. And from a Western perspective, it has been shown to help lower cholesterol.

Typical Acupuncture points would likely include Liver 3 on the top of your foot, Liver 13 (the influential point of the Spleen, located on your side), and Stomach 36 and 40, both on your lower leg. Other points may be used, as well. Stomach 36 (Zu san li) is probably the most important Acupuncture point on your body. It should not be stimulated if you are pregnant, or think you might be pregnant. But if pregnancy is not a concern, anyone can stimulate this point gently to help improve digestion by placing a heating pad across the shins, just below the knees. It’s good for you, and it feels good, too!