

SHULAN CLINIC – ACUPUNCTURE • CHINESE HERBAL MEDICINE

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Backache & TCM – by Prof. Shulan Tang



Chinese Herb – Da Ji (*Cirsium ianonicum*)

Four out of five people will be crippled by backache at sometime in their lives. In severe cases it can affect ones normal life and working capacity.

Painkillers usually only relieve the pain temporarily but cannot cure the cause of the pain. In terms of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) we say that the back is the mansion of the kidney, therefore backache is nearly always related to the kidney. In the book Huang Di Nei Jin, written over two thousand years ago, it says, “the back is the mansion of the kidney. If the back cannot move, it means the kidney is weak”.

In the book Jin Kui Yao Lue, written in the Han dynasty, it says, “Back pain with cold feeling can be as heavy as carrying five thousand coins”. The cold referred to here is the cold-dampness affecting the back. In clinical terms, backache can be caused by wind-cold, damp-heat, blood stasis, injury, pregnancy, labour, over-work, or overactive sexual activity, resulting in kidney deficiency.

Treatment of backache with TCM

First of all we have to tonify the kidney, then formulate a treatment based on the differentiation of the signs and symptoms.

Cold-damp type backache

Main symptoms

Backache with cold-heavy feeling, lack of movement, worse when lying down and on cold rainy days, thick white coating on the tongue.

Treatment

Expel wind-evil and clear away cold, warm and dredge the channels.

If the source of the pain moves, it can mean there is a wind-evil, which has to be expelled. For this we can use Du Huo Ji Sheng Tang.

If you suffer from cold-damp backache, you have to keep warm and dry. Try to avoid swimming, as the water will affect the damp. Feng Shi You, a kind of herbal oil, can be used to rub the back area to warm and relax the muscles. A medicated plaster containing herbs can be applied to the back to support it and relieve the pain. Moxibustion is also good for this type of backache.

Damp-Heat type backache

Main symptoms

Backache with warm or burning sensation, worse in hot environments, sometimes easier after movement, yellow, greasy coating on tongue, soft and rapid pulse.

Treatment

Clear away the heat and expel the damp, soothe the channels and relieve pain.

If there is severe pain, add Ru Xiang Mo Yao. The warming treatment of Moxibustion does not suit this type of backache.

It needs something cool to help and it is better to use essential green oil.

Kidney deficiency type backache

Main symptoms

The backache is helped by pressing or massaging for the relief of pain, weakness in the knees and legs, worse when feeling tired; if one lies down it feels better and the pain recurs often.

If there is kidney yang deficiency, there will be feelings of cold, lower abdominal pain, pale, hot flushes, red tongue and rapid and weak pulse.

Treatment method

Kidney yang deficiency: tonify the kidney yang.

Moxibustion, Feng Shi You and medicated herbal plasters are also helpful for this type of backache.

Kidney yin deficiency: tonify kidney yin

If backache continues for a long time and there are no significant yang or yin deficiencies, it is usually due to general kidney deficiency. For this we can use Qin Er Wan.

Blood stasis type backache

Main symptoms

Backache with sharp pain, fixed location of pain, inability to bend. In severe cases, one cannot move due to the source of the pain and pressure makes it worse. Purple tongue or purple spots on the tongue, hesitant pulse. Often, patients may have a history of injury.

Treatment Method

Promote blood circulation to remove blood stasis. Regulate vital energy and alleviate pain.

If there any symptoms of wind and damp symptoms, add Du Hou, We Ling Xian, Qiu Jiao to expel the wind-damp. If there is kidney deficiency, add Xu Duan, Du Zhong and Huai Niu Xi to invigorate the kidney and strengthen the bones.

Overall, in cases of backache, the root cause of the problem is due to kidney deficiency and the result of this would be external effects, injuries etc. The book Zhen Zhi Zhun Sheng, says, “there are wind, damp, cold, heat injuries and blood stasis, vital energy stagnation, phlegm, of all branches, kidney deficiency is the root.” The key cause of these problems is kidney deficiency. Therefore in TCM, when we treat cold-damp, damp-heat and blood stasis type backache, we use herbs to tonify the kidney and strengthen the back.

For this, I have created a formula, Han Re Gou Tong Feng. This formula is neither hot or cold, but is good for backache with feelings of low energy and osteo-arthritis backache with warm feelings in the back area. Another formula, Zhuan Gu Guan Ji Wan is more suitable for backache with weak and cold feelings in the back area. In general, gentle exercise like Qigong or Taiji may be beneficial to prevent back injury and the use of herbs to tonify the kidney can also be effective in preventing backache. Anyone may find a combination of these useful.