



# 中醫 TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE

## Irritable Bowel Syndrome - TCM Treatment Strategies

A staggering three million Australians suffer from Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS).<sup>1</sup> IBS accounts for 20 - 50% of visits to gastroenterologists.<sup>2</sup>

Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) occurs when muscles in the intestines contract faster or slower than normal. This causes pain, cramping, colic, gas, as well as sudden bouts of diarrhoea and/or constipation. There are two types of IBS:

1. Spastic colon IBS: characterised by constipation, diarrhoea, or both, this form of IBS is also often accompanied with pain in the digestive tract after eating.
2. Painless diarrhoea IBS: this form of IBS is characterised by the sudden onset of diarrhoea during or after meals, or upon waking.

Sign and symptoms common to both types of IBS include:

- Cramping pain in the lower abdomen;
- Bloating and gas;
- Changes in bowel habits (ie: diarrhoea or constipation, or both alternately);
- Relief of pain after bowel movements;
- Feeling of incomplete emptying after bowel movements;
- Mucus in the stool.

### Causes of IBS

There is no single cause attributable to IBS; there are, however, a cluster of possible underlying causes. For instance, there may be a disturbance in the muscle movement of the intestine or a lower tolerance for stretching and movement of the intestine. Diet is also a major cause of IBS, with food allergens often causing IBS symptoms. Stress is also a major causative factor – up to 60% of individuals with the syndrome have psychological symptoms, such as anxiety and depression.<sup>2</sup>

### Treatment Options for IBS

The nature of the disorder makes Western medical treatment difficult. However, TCM with its theory of pattern differentiation, offers powerful tools to treat the patient's symptoms effectively. For example, remarkable results were demonstrated by an Australian randomised, double-blind, placebo-controlled trial of Chinese herbal medicine (CHM) as a treatment for



IBS, run by the Complementary Medicine Unit at the University of Western Sydney in 1996/1997.<sup>3</sup> The study compared individualised therapy against a standard Chinese herbal formulation for IBS (see table 1) and a placebo.

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**Table 1. - Standard Formula ( Capsule Ingredients)\***

Chinese Name	Pharmaceutical Name	Powered Herb, %
Dang Shen	<i>Codonopsis pilosulae, radix</i>	7
Huo Xiang	<i>Agastaches seu pogostemi, herba</i>	4.5
Fang Feng	<i>Ledebouriellae sesloodis, radix</i>	3
Yi Yi Ren	<i>Coieis lachryma-jobi, semen</i>	7
Chai Hu	<i>Bupleurum chinese</i>	4.5
Yin Chen	<i>Artemesiae capillaris, herba</i>	13
Bai Zhu	<i>Atractylodis macrocephalae, rhizoma</i>	9
Hou Po	<i>Magnoliae officinalis, cortex</i>	4.5
Chen Pi	<i>Citri reticulatae, pericarpium</i>	3
Pao Jiang	<i>Zingiberis officinalis, rhizoma</i>	4.5
Fu Ling	<i>Poriae cocos, sclerotium (Hoelen)</i>	4.5
Bai Zhi	<i>Angelicae dahuricae, radix</i>	4.5
Che Qian Zi	<i>Ptntaginis, semen</i>	2
Huang Bai	<i>Phelloodendri, cortex</i>	4.5
Zhi Gan Cao	<i>Glycyrrhizae uralensis, radix</i>	4.5
Bai Shao	<i>Paeoniae lactiflorae, radix</i>	3
Mu Xiang	<i>Saussureae seu vladimtrae, radix</i>	3
Huang Lian	<i>Coptidis, rhizoma</i>	3
Wu Wei Zi	<i>Schisandrae, fructus</i>	7

\*Pharmaceutical terminology from Hsu.<sup>18</sup>

Compared with patients in the placebo group, patients in the active treatment groups (standard and individualised Chinese herbal medicine) had significant improvement in bowel symptom scores and significant global improvement, reporting that treatment significantly reduced the degree of interference with life caused by IBS symptoms. Chinese herbal formulations (CHM) individually tailored to the patient proved no more effective than standard CHM treatment, however on follow-up 14 weeks after completion of treatment, only the individualised CHM treatment group maintained improvement.<sup>3</sup> According to the authors, one plausible explanation may be that the standard CHM formulation (a formulation considered to regulate and strengthen bowel function) was suitably designed to treat the complex presentations of IBS but was incapable of successfully dealing with underlying causes for most patients as viewed by Chinese medicine.

#### Liver-Spleen Disharmony: An Underlying Pattern for This Disorder<sup>4</sup>

Although the disorder characteristically involves a liver spleen disharmony, it also tends to be complicated by multiple patterns. Hence, treatment should be flexible and may involve several treatment approaches or focus on

different approaches in different stages of the disease. Discussed below are an experiential formula with additions which will provide a good basis for treatment, and an overview of different patterns with formulas to maintain a broad view and flexibility in treatment.

#### Experiential formula by Dr. Chen Wen Li of Shanghai University of Traditional Chinese Medicine

This experiential formula addresses liver spleen disharmony in IBS patients by coursing the liver and strengthening the spleen, relaxing tension and relieving pain. The formula includes:

- He Shou Wu [Ho Shou-Wu] 15 g,
- Fu Xiao Mai [Wheat] 50 g,
- Da Zao [Jujube] 15 g,
- Bai Zhu [Atractylodes, white] 10 g,
- Xi Xin [Asarum] 5 g,
- Wu Zhu Yu [Evodia] 5 g,
- Chuan Jiao [Sichuan pepper] 10 g,
- Bai Shao [White Peony] 20 g,
- Huang Lian [Coptis] 6 g,
- Zhi Gan Cao [Honey fried Radix Glycyrrhizae Uralensis] 5 g,
- Zhi Fu Pian [Aconite] 5 g.

The formula works best with patients suffering abdominal distension and pain relieved by warmth and pressure, diarrhoea, aversion to cold and like for

warmth, rib-side distension and pain. The formula is frequently modified with singles to suit the individual patient. Typically, one week after start of administration the diarrhoea and pain will be significantly relieved, and after three weeks the patient's overall condition is significantly improved and stable. Patients are also advised to learn to relax and manage their stress more effectively.

#### Overview of Relevant TCM Patterns in IBS

##### 1. Liver spleen disharmony

- Main symptoms: Abdominal distension and pain, diarrhoea, pain relieved after bowel movement, or constipation, or alternating diarrhoea and pain, with rib-side distension, bitter taste in the mouth, irritable, red tongue with thin coating, stringlike pulse.
- Guiding formula: *Si Ni San* [Bupleurum & Zhi Shi Combination], or *Xiao Yao San* [Bupleurum & Dang Gui Formula], or *Tong Xie Yao Fang* [Peony & Atractylodes Combination] which can be made up of the singles Bai Zhu [Atractylodes white], Bai Shao [White Peony], Chen Pi [Citrus], Fang Feng [Siler]. *Tong Xie Yao Fang* is the guiding formula for IBS of the spastic colon type (painful diarrhoea).
- Additions according to individual patient:
  - For abdominal distension add Mu Xiang [Radix Aucklandiae], fo shou [Finger Citrus], Xiang Fu Zi [Cyperus].
  - For abdominal pain, add Chuan Lian Zi [Melia], Yan Hu Suo [Corydalis].
  - For constipation, add Bing Leng [Areca catechu].
  - For diarrhoea, add Yi Yi Ren [Coix], Bai Bian Dou [Semen Dolichoris Album], Dang Shen [Codonopsis].
  - For palpitations and insomnia, add Bai Zi Ren [Biota], Ye Jiao Teng [Polygonum Stem].

##### 2. Spleen and stomach qi deficiency

- Main symptoms: Abdominal distension and pain, diarrhoea, symptoms exacerbated by after consumption of greasy foods, or diarrhoea with no appetite, palpitations, insomnia, pale swollen tongue with white coating, thin weak pulse.
- Guiding formula: *Si Jun Zi Tang* [Four Major Herb Combination], or *Liu Jun Zi Tang* [Six Major Herb Combination], or *Shen Ling Bai Zhu San* [Ginseng & Atractylodes Formula]. In case

of centre qi falling after long term diarrhoea, *Bu Zhong Yi Qi Tang* [Ginseng & Astragalus Formula] can also be used.

- Additions according to individual patient:
  - For palpitations, insomnia, vexation and agitation, add Zhi Gan Cao [Honey fried Radix Glycyrrhizae Uralensis], Fu Xiao Mai [Wheat], Suan Zo Ren [Zizyphus], Ye Jiao Teng [Polygonum Stem], Da Zao [Jujube] to nourish the heart and calm the spirit.
  - For constipation, add Yu Li Ren [Semen Pruni], Huo Ma Ren [Hemp Seed].
  - For thick greasy tongue coating and other signs of damp turbidity obstructing the middle burner, add Cang Zhu [Atractylodes] and Sha Ren [Cardamon].

### 3. Spleen and kidney yang deficiency

- Main symptoms: Abdominal distension, abdominal pain better for warmth and pressure, diarrhoea or constipation, or alternating diarrhoea and constipation, aversion to cold and like for warmth, weak and aching lumbus and knees, pale tongue with white coating, deep fine pulse.
- Guiding formula: *Li Zhong Tang* [Ginseng & Ginger Combination].
- Additions:
  - For old frail patients or generally weak patients, add qi tonics such as Huang Qi [Astragalus].
  - For abdominal distension, add Zhi Ke [Citrus, ripe], Sha Ren [Cardamon].
  - For constipation, add Rou Cong Rong [Cistanche], Tu Si Zi [Cuscuta].
  - For diarrhoea, add Che Qian Zi [Plantago], Ze Xie [Alisma].
  - For abdominal pain, add Bai Shao [White Peony] and qi moving pain relieving medicinals such as Xiang Fu Zi [Cyperus].



### 4. Qi stagnation with damp obstruction

- Main symptoms: This pattern can be divided into cold and heat. Cold: Abdominal distension and pain, diarrhoea or constipation, or alternating diarrhoea and constipation, with rumbling intestines, no appetite, white greasy tongue coating, soggy moderate pulse. Heat: manifesting as irritation and thirst, short voidings of yellow urine, yellow greasy tongue coating, soggy or slippery fast pulse.
- Guiding formula: Heat: *Chai Hu Shu Gan San* [Bupleurum & Cyperus Formula] with Ge Gen Qin Lian Tang. Cold: *Chai Hu Shu Gan San* [Bupleurum & Cyperus Formula] with *Ping Wei San* [Magnolia & Ginger Combination] or *Wei Ling Tang Jia Jian* [Magnolia & Hoelen Formula] with additions.
- Additions:
  - For pain, add Yan Hu Suo [Corydalis], Chuan Lian Zi [Melia].
  - For diarrhoea, add Ze Xie [Alisma], Che Qian Zi [Plantago], Zhu Ling [Polyporus].

### 5. Qi stagnation with blood stagnation

- This pattern often appears as a result of long standing other patterns. Other reasons are deficiency, be it qi, blood, yin, or yang deficiency leading to impaired flow of qi and blood, or qi stagnation leading to blood stasis.
- Main symptoms: Abdominal distension and pain, diarrhoea or constipation, or alternating diarrhoea and constipation, belching, suffering of fullness in the chest and rib-side, purple tongue with stasis speckles, rough pulse.
- Guiding formula: If the pattern is due to qi stagnation leading to blood stasis: *Chai Hu Shu Gan San* [Bupleurum & Cyperus Formula] and *Jin Ling Zi San* [Melia Fruit & Corydalis Formula]. *Jin Ling Zi San* is made up of the singles Yan Hu Suo [Corydalis] and Chuan Lian Zi [Melia].



If the pattern is due to deficiency, use a formula that supplements the deficiency alongside with medicinals that move qi and quicken blood, such as Chai Hu [Bupleurum], Zhi Ke [Citrus, ripe], Shao Yao [Peony], Yu Jin [Curcuma aromatica], Xiang Fu Zi [Cyperus], Chuan Lian Zi [Melia], Dan Shen [Salvia], Chi Shao [Red Peony], Chuan Xiong [Cnidium].

- Additions:
  - For diarrhoea, add Bai Jiang Cao [Patrinia scabiosaefolia], Che Qian Zi [Plantago], Zhu Ling [Polyporus].
  - For tenesmus, add Zhi Ke [Citrus, ripe], Bing Leng [Areca catechu].

### Case history – Example of how TCM can help IBS patients<sup>5</sup>

Female, 49, complains of defecation troubles that started three years ago, namely diarrhoea two to three times per day mostly in the mornings, with abdominal distension after eating, rumbling intestines, occasional dull abdominal pain, no appetite, pale face, fatigue and no energy, pale tongue with white greasy coating, soggy fine pulse. The diarrhoea episodes last more than two months. After additional physical exams in the western medicine department, she was diagnosed with IBS, with the TCM pattern of spleen and stomach deficiency.

Treatment principle: Supplement qi and strengthen the spleen, transform dampness and alleviate diarrhoea.

Formula: Dang Shen [Codonopsis] 15 g, Huang Qi [Astragalus] 20 g, Bai Zhu [Atractylodes, white] 10 g, Bian Dou [Dolichos] 10 g, Shan Yao [Dioscorea] 10 g, Chen Pi [Citrus] 6 g, Fu Ling [Hoelen] 10 g, Yi Yi Ren [Coix] 30g, Sha Ren [Cardamon] 5 g, Mu Xiang [Radix Aucklandiae] 10 g, Shen Qu [Massa fermentu] 10 g.

After seven days of taking the above formula, her stool frequency had reduced to once per day, still not formed, but the rumbling in the intestines had decreased, her appetite had normalised, and her dull abdominal pain and distension were significantly alleviated. After another five days of taking the formula her stool was formed normally, frequency once per day, with no abdominal pain and normal appetite.

References available on request.