



# 中醫 TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE

## Menopause – A Chinese Medicine Perspective

Menopause is a normal biological event that marks the end of a woman's reproductive years. It is the point when menstruation stops permanently. On average, menopause occurs at age 51, but like the beginning of menstruation in adolescence, timing varies from person to person. Most women will spend at least one-third of their lives in or beyond menopause.

Menopause is the last stage of a gradual biological process in which the ovaries reduce their production of female sex hormones. Oestrogen production in the body diminishes slowly over a period of years, commonly resulting in hot flashes, night sweats, mood swings, and memory loss. This gradual phase before the permanent cessation of menstrual periods is sometimes called peri-menopause. The process of menopause is considered complete when a woman has not menstruated for an entire year. Another type of menopause, known as surgical menopause, occurs if both ovaries are removed for medical reasons. This may be done at the time of a hysterectomy (removal of the uterus).

Living without the protective effects of oestrogen increases a woman's risk for developing serious medical conditions, including osteoporosis and cardiovascular disease. There are a variety of treatments available to help ease the symptoms of and reduce health risks associated with menopause.

### Signs and Symptoms

Each woman experiences her own variation of the typical symptoms of menopause. Some studies even suggest that the signs and symptoms of menopause may vary between cultural groups. For example, up to 80% of American women experience hot flashes during menopause while only 10% of Japanese women experience that symptom. Some researchers speculate that these differences may be due to differences in diet, lifestyle, and/or cultural

attitudes toward ageing. In general, however, the loss of oestrogen that occurs during menopause causes the following symptoms:

- Irregular menstrual cycles - menstrual bleeding slows, becomes erratic, and then stops permanently (the process takes about four years)
- Hot flushes-flushing of face and chest (may be accompanied by heart palpitations, dizziness, headaches)
- Night sweats
- Cold hands and feet
- Vaginal changes - dryness, itching, bleeding after intercourse
- Urinary changes - frequent urination, burning during urination, urinating at night, incontinence
- Insomnia
- Mood changes - depression, irritability, tension (usually occurs with sleep disturbances)
- Loss of skin tone leading to wrinkles
- Weight gain and change in weight distribution with increased fat in the central, abdominal area

Over time, depleted oestrogen levels can contribute to the development of more serious medical conditions including the following:

- Osteoporosis
- Cardiovascular disease
- Alzheimer's disease
- Macular degeneration (the leading cause of blindness in the Western world)
- Glaucoma
- Colon cancer

### Western Drug Therapies

There are many medications available in the form of natural and synthetic hormones (oestrogen and progesterone) to treat symptoms of menopause, commonly referred to as hormone replacement therapy (HRT). Oestrogen replacement therapy (ERT) refers to the administration of oestrogen alone. ERT has proven to be very effective in relieving many of the symptoms of menopause, and is also

thought to help prevent osteoporosis. Hormone treatment for menopause is quite controversial. Preliminary research suggested that HRT might help prevent heart disease. But, the latest and largest studies report that that is not the case. In fact, HRT may increase your risk for both heart disease and stroke. Of particular concern is that taking HRT can put you at increased risk for breast cancer. Based on these concerns and scientific evidence to date, physicians are unable to recommend long term use of HRT.

### TCM Pathomechanism

A pathomechanism commonly mentioned in modern TCM textbooks is kidney yin vacuity failing to nourish the heart and liver, leading to hyperactivity of fire of the heart and liver. While this focus on kidney yin vacuity has strongly influenced TCM treatment of menopausal syndrome in the West, Volker Scheid rightly comments that:

**"physicians in China and Japan use many other treatment strategies from within the wider Chinese medical tradition in clinical practice."<sup>i</sup>**

The correlation of kidney deficiency and menopause is based on a famous quote from the first chapter in the Huang Di Nei Jing Su Wen regarding the growth and decline of human life, which for women occurs in seven-year cycles. Scheid explains in his article how this passage came to be oversimplified in many contemporary gynaecology texts, reducing the meaning to:

**"Around the cessation of menstruation the kidney qi gradually declines ...hence kidney deficiency is the root cause of this disorder [menopause]"<sup>ii</sup>.**

The article then gives examples of Chinese medicine physicians who interpret the passage from the Inner Canon differently, for although it defines growth and development as emanating from the vigour of kidney qi, its account of decline

emphasise beyond the conception and penetrating vessels the yang channels, particularly yang brightness (yangming). In clinical practice, therefore, many gynaecologists emphasise treatment of the kidneys only in younger women, while for older women the spleen and stomach visceral systems, which are associated with both the yang brightness and the penetrating vessel, are considered more important. The influential Ming dynasty physician Wang Kentang (1549-1613), whose ideas shape the practice of many contemporary gynaecologists, writes:

**“During their childhood, before they menstruate [and are fertile], women’s [physiology] is subordinated to the lesser yin [i.e. the kidneys]. When they menstruate [and are fertile] it is subordinated to the terminal yin [i.e. the liver]. When menstruation [and fertility] ceases, it is subordinated to the greater yin [i.e. the spleen].”**

### Cultural Variability in the Manifestation of Menopausal Syndrome

At a conference of the Japan Menopause Society a medical research group presenting a report on various treatments for menopause noted that while menopause symptoms traditionally reported in western countries include hot flashes, perspiration, depression and insomnia; in Japan physical symptoms such as fatigue, shoulder stiffness and chills are most common. Pointing to these differences, the report concluded that it is important to treat patients individually according to their specific symptoms.<sup>iii</sup>

A QUT Brisbane study<sup>iv</sup> comparing the experience of menopause of Taiwanese and Australian women found quite significant cultural variability in the manifestation of menopausal syndrome between these two groups. The most common complaints amongst Taiwanese women were unusual tiredness, backache, and dry skin, light-headedness, less sexual feelings and dry vagina. In comparison, Australian women reported most commonly sleeplessness, irritability, headaches, anxiety, joint pain, mood changes, hot flushes, depression and feelings of being unloved. Overall, Australian women experienced more menopausal symptoms than Taiwanese women.

Contributing factors to this outcome may be different diet, lifestyle, and the fact that Asian societies have a different,

more positive, cultural attitude to ageing. Whatever the cause, the existence of this cultural variability has to be taken into account when taking inspiration from general Chinese or Japanese treatment strategies.

### Kampo - the Japanese study and Adaptation of Traditional Chinese Medicine

According to the Japan Menopause Society, the most frequently prescribed Kampo formulas for patients with menopausal symptoms in Japan are *Jia Wei Xiao Yao San* [Bupleurum & Peony Combination/Kami-shoyo-san], *Dang Gui Shao Yao San* [Dang Gui & Peony Combination/Toki-shakuyaku-san], and *Gui Zhi Fu Ling Wan* [Cinnamon & Hoelen Combination/Keishi-bukuryo-gan]. The combined share of these three Kampo medicines amounts to 12.5% of medicine prescribed for menopause in Japan, therefore, making Kampo second only to conjugated estrogen (16.8%).

*Jia Wei Xiao Yao San* spread liver qi, strengthens the spleen, nourishes the blood, and clears heat. *Dang Gui Shao Yao San* nourishes liver blood, spread liver qi, strengthens the spleen and resolve dampness. *Gui Zhi Fu Ling Wan* quickens the blood and transforms blood stasis. Hence, the Kampo approach is quite different from modern Chinese textbook theory.



### Chinese Pattern Differentiation Kidney vacuity with liver effulgence

- **Main symptoms:** Menstruation irregular or ceased, dizziness, tinnitus, hot flushes and sweating. Secondary symptoms: Irritability, aching and weak lumbus, dry stool, red tongue with little coating, fine rapid pulse or fine stringlike pulse.
- **Treatment principles:** Enrich the kidney, calm the liver, quiet the spirit.
- **Formula:** Sheng Di Huang [Raw Rehmannia] 15g, Bai Shao [White Peony] 15g, Xuan Shen [Scrophularia] 9g, Zhi Mu [Anemarrhena] 9g, Gou Qi Zi [Lycium Fruit] 9g, Ju Hua [Chrysanthemum] 9g, Huang Bai [Phellodendron] 6g (Formula by

Dr. Wang Da Zeng)<sup>v</sup>. All quantities referring to raw herbs.

### Heart and liver fire effulgence

- **Main symptoms:** Menstruation irregular or ceased, hot flushes and sweating, irritability, vexation.
- **Secondary symptoms:** Bitter taste in the mouth and dry throat, palpitations, insomnia, red tongue, thin yellow coating, stringlike pulse or fine stringlike pulse.
- **Treatment principles:** Clear the heart, calm the liver, quiet the spirit.
- **Formula:** *Gan Mai Dao Zao Tang* [Licorice & Jujube Combination] plus Long Gu [Dragon Bone] 15g, Suan Zao Ren [Zizyphus] 9g, Mai Men Dong [Ophiopogon] 9g, Bai Shao [White Peony] 9g, Dan Shen [Salvia] 9g. All quantities referring to raw herbs.

### Spleen and kidney yang vacuity

- **Main symptoms:** Menstruation irregular, profuse menstruation, pale flow, faintness, shortness of breath and disinclination to talk, aversion to cold especially in the back and lumbar region.
- **Secondary symptoms:** Tired, no energy, white facial complexion, no appetite, loose stool, long voidings of clear urine, enlarged tongue with tooth marks, thin coating, deep fine pulse.
- **Treatment principle:** Warm and supplement spleen and kidney.
- **Formula:** *Li Zhong Tang* [Ginseng & Ginger Combination] plus *Shen Ling Bai Zhu San* [Ginseng & Atractylodes Formula].

### Heart blood vacuity

- **Main symptoms:** Heart palpitations, insomnia, dream disturbed sleep, emotions instable and hard to control.
- **Secondary symptoms:** Susceptibility to fright, oversuspicious, hot flushes and sweating, red tongue, may have raised papules on tip of tongue, thin greasy coating, thin rough or intermittent pulse.
- **Treatment principle:** Nourish heart blood, benefit heart qi.
- **Formula:** *Gan Mai Da Zao Tang* [Licorice & Jujube Combination] plus *Sheng Mai San* [Ginseng & Ophiopogon Formula] plus Sheng Di Huang [Raw Rehmannia] 12g, Dan Shen [Salvia] 9g, Pu Huang [Pollen Typhae] 9g, Fu Ling [Hoelen] 9g, Bai Zi Ren [Biota] 9g. All quantities referring to raw herbs.

References available on request.

## Formulas Often Used in the Treatment of Menopause

Formula Name	Traditional Indication	Use in Menopause
<b>LIVER REPLETION</b>		
<i>Jia Wei XiaoYao San</i> Bupleurum & Peony Combination	Liver qi stasis leading to fire, blood vacuity, spleen vacuity.	Hot flushes, night sweats, cold extremities, palpitations. Emotional distress: Depression, anxiety, neurotic conditions. Headaches: Tension headaches. Sleep disturbances: Waking in early morning hours, dream disturbed sleep. Urinary disorders, Stiffness or pain in neck, shoulder, arm. Hypertension.
<i>Long Dan Xie Gan Tang</i> Gentiana Combination	Repletion heat in the liver and gallbladder, damp heat in the lower jiao.	Migraine headache. Inflammatory conditions of the lower urinary tract or the reproductive apparatus. Urethral syndrome, incontinence. Hypertension.
<b>YIN VACUITY</b>		
<i>Zhi Bai Di Huang Wan</i> Anemarrhena, Phellodendron & Rehmannia Formula]	Liver and kidney yin vacuity with yin vacuity fire flaring.	Hot flushes, night sweats, vaginal dryness and other dryness symptoms, insomnia (waking up frequently during the night), hypertension.
<i>Qing Xin Lian Zi Yin</i> Lotus Seed Combination	Qi and yin vacuity, heart fire flaring, lin pattern (stranguria/urogenital disorders).	Urinary disorders, incontinence. Insomnia. Fatigue.
<b>QI VACUITY</b>		
<i>Bu Zhong Yi Qi Tang</i> Ginseng & Astragalus Combination	Qi vacuity of the spleen and stomach, centre qi fall, spleen failing to manage blood.	Fatigue. Incontinence, or other urinary problems due to insufficient bladder and sphincter tone. Chronic intermittent loss of small amounts of menstrual blood. Prolapsed uterus. Chronic vacuity headache.
<b>BLOOD STASIS</b>		
<i>Gui Zhi Fu Ling Wan</i> Cinnamon & Hoelen Combination	Blood stasis and phlegm.	Abnormal uterine bleeding. Low back pain, sciatica. Hot flushes. Chronic headaches. Varicose veins.
<b>HEART PATTERNS</b>		
<i>Chai Hu Jia Long Gu Mu Li Tang</i> Bupleurum & Dragon Bone Combination	Heart and liver fire flaring, spleen qi vacuity, phlegm-damp.	Emotional distress: anxiety, depression, irrational behaviour, neurotic conditions. Sleep disturbances: difficulty falling asleep and maintaining sleep, dream disturbed sleep, non-restorative sleep. Hot flushes. Chronic headaches, stiffness and pain in neck and shoulder. Hypertension, atherosclerosis.
<i>Gui Zhi Jia Long Gu Mu Li Tang</i> Cinnamon & Dragon Bone Combination	Insufficient qi and blood with yang rising, spirit disturbance. Non-interaction of heart and kidney.	Emotional distress: Nervous exhaustion, neurotic conditions. Sleep disturbances: difficulty falling asleep or maintaining sleep, dream disturbed sleep. Hot flushes. Urinary disorders: incontinence, nocturia, urethral syndrome.
<i>Gui Pi Tang</i> Ginseng & Longan Combination	Heart blood vacuity and spleen qi vacuity.	Insomnia: Difficulty falling asleep. Emotional distress: Anxiety, depression, neurotic conditions. Fatigue. Chronic abnormal uterine bleeding.

## PRACTITIONER RESOURCES

**Chineseherbacademy** is a forum for professional Practitioners of Chinese Herbal Medicine to discuss topics relevant to their practices. This informative web based forum (<http://health.groups.yahoo.com/group/chineseherbacademy/>) has 1589 members and is approaching its tenth year running. Posts typically average around 200-400 a month, with a record of 1773 posts in November 2003! Members include well known authors and educators in the field of Chinese Medicine, and discussions are typically free thinking and high quality. Membership to the **Chineseherbacademy** is open to licensed healthcare professionals and matriculated students of accredited TCM colleges, as well as approved students, postgraduates and professionals in related fields, such as Chinese philosophy and pharmacology. Members can ask questions and reply to all other subscribers by posting comments to the mailing list. Members choose to either receive individual emails, a daily digest or access to daily messages via yahoo!Groups website.

**Acupuncture Network Australasia ANA** is a dynamic new organisation set up to promote and support Acupuncture and Chinese Medicine (CM) in Australia, New Zealand and the South East Asia. ANA aims to do this by establishing an online acupuncture community, with forums where Practitioners and students can discuss TCM theory and the practicalities of primary healthcare. <http://forums.acupuncture.net.au/>