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The magazine for International Healthcare & Wellbeing



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Treating Insomnia With TCM

THE PAIRING OF ACUPUNCTURE WITH HERBAL REMEDIES CAN BRING RELIEF TO PATIENTS WITH CHRONIC INSOMNIA, NIGHTMARES AND EVEN SLEEP APNEA

Good sleep is a sign of good health. If you sleep poorly, it indicates an imbalance in your body. Regularly disturbed sleep can affect your health as well as your energy levels and moods, because sleep strengthens the immune system. As a factor in your health, sleep is as important as diet and exercise.

Insomnia can be a very uncomfortable condition to live with. Its effects are both mental and physical. People suffering with chronic insomnia are more likely than others to develop depression or anxiety disorders. The mental faculties associated with problem solving and decision making suffer; and those with chronic diseases or illnesses will find their symptoms exacerbated.

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) regards insomnia as a symptom, not an illness. While Western medicine seeks a physical or emotional problem that is causing the sleeplessness, TCM recognises it may stem from a fundamental imbalance of energy or *qi*.

According to Gianna Buonocore, a TCM Practitioner at the Integrated Medicine Institute in Hong Kong, insomnia is due to the poor functioning of various organs, invariably including the heart.

“TCM believes the heart houses the *shen* (spirit), which needs adequate nourishment from the blood. Disturbances in the heart’s ability to anchor the *shen* – such as too much heat or too little blood – will lead to restlessness, insomnia, palpitations, anxiety or agitation. The most common patterns of disharmony and causes of insomnia include liver fire and stomach disharmony.”

Peter Yeung, A TCM Practitioner at The Body Group in Hong Kong, agrees. Without getting technical, he says sleeplessness has two main causes, the liver and the spleen. “Stress, anger and emotional factors can affect the liver, as well as alcohol and fatty foods. All of these can disrupt the mind, leading to insomnia, restlessness, irritability and possibly nightmares,” he says.

Yeung explains that, in TCM, the spleen is said to control the mind. “When the spleen is weak, the mind is weak. That means the mind can wander, think a lot, and be unfocused. The spleen can also be harmed by poor diet, excessive worry, overthinking, too many cold or raw meals, and iced drinks.”

Predictably, the length of time it takes to treat insomnia varies, as each case is unique. Yeung says patients may see an improvement after as few as three treatments. Buonocore normally recommends between five and 10 treatments, ideally at two or three-day intervals. Once she begins to





see an improvement, she normally reduces the number of sessions to one a week.

Acupuncture is usually prescribed for insomnia due to certain causes, such as a recent emotional upheaval. “Acupuncture is a safe and effective method of treatment. The strategically placed needles have a very powerful effect on the balance of the body’s energies, resulting in a calmer mind,” says Yeung.

A combination of acupuncture and herbs is used for more serious or chronic cases. Buonocore says she sometimes prescribes herbs to be taken at night-time only, and sometimes both day and night. “Daytime herbs are more invigorating, while night-time ones, taken half an hour before bedtime, are relaxing and sedating. In some cases, dietary changes and reduced stress levels are also strongly recommended.”

TCM may be an ancient practice, but it recognises that each patient is unique. Their signs and symptoms vary, so the treatment of insomnia requires a customised approach. [GHT](#)

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How do you begin to treat a problem like insomnia?

Gianna Buonocore, TCM Practitioner (Acupuncture), IMI Hong Kong

“I start by asking what the patient means by insomnia, and how long the condition has existed. For example, does the patient have difficulty falling asleep, or does he or she wake up frequently during the night? Does the patient dream a lot, or wake up thinking about work? To determine the root cause and pattern of the disharmony, I also investigate other pre-existing symptoms and aggravating factors. That is because an individual symptom or sign means nothing on its own. All the symptoms must be considered in relation to one another.

“Early in the consultation I will ask myself whether the patient has a pattern of deficiency or excess. A deficient pattern will require a nourishing treatment, and an excess pattern will require a sedating one. That involves looking at the colour of the patient’s complexion, hearing his or her voice, and observing his or her bodily movements. Checking the tongue and pulse can also indicate how serious the problem is and whether herbs should be prescribed.”