

Optimising Your Health with TCM

Ever felt persistently tired, excessively irritable, or jaded but cannot pinpoint what is wrong? You are not ill, but are not exactly in the pink of health either. What is this uncomfortable unexplainable phenomenon have you been experiencing?

In 1996, Chinese scholars coined the term “Sub-optimal health status” (Sub-health or SHS) to describe this vague condition. Over the years, the concept of SHS has become widely accepted in many countries, like China, Japan, Australia, and Papua New Guinea.

Sub-health or SHS refers to a status between healthy and diseased states and is characterised by recurrent physical discomfort and reduced vitality. The most common physical symptoms presented by individuals with SHS include fatigue, insomnia, profuse dreaming, and bodily pain. Other symptoms include indigestion, constipation, cold hands and feet, excessive sweating, stuffy nose and allergy, frequent colds and tinnitus.

There are also psychological symptoms, like depression, anxiety, restlessness, irritability, fearfulness, decline in short-term memory or difficulty concentrating; while a decline in social activities and adaptabilities include reduced involvement in social activities or tendency to cause interpersonal tension.

If any of the above conditions persists for at least three months and any illness that may lead to the condition has been excluded, a diagnosis for physical, mental or social ability suboptimal health can be made accordingly.

SHS does not meet the diagnostic criteria of organic diseases or psychological disorders, and has no conclusive laboratory markers. More often than not, doctors are likely to tell you that there is nothing wrong with you and that no further treatment is needed.

Causes: lifestyle, stress, environment

Research conducted in Hong Kong found that high levels of workplace stress and unhealthy habits like sleep deprivation, lack of exercise, and poor diet are believed to be major contributors to sub-health symptoms. Those most affected were aged 30-49, with an average of more than nine symptoms. People with sub-health report a poor quality of life. Since the symptoms are less noticeable than those of diseases, they are often ignored. However, overlooking these warning signs increases the risk of developing chronic diseases. Therefore, it has become increasingly important to identify effective intervention methods.

Prevention and treatment

Sub-healthy individuals are at high risk of developing disease if not treated in time. But, sub-health in most people can be eliminated by adopting appropriate lifestyle modifications. Several studies have suggested that physical activity, healthy diet and other lifestyle modifications can affect sub-health favourably.

TCM Treatment of Sub-Optimal Health

Unlike Western medicine which tends to diagnose illnesses by the identifying specific pathogens, TCM evaluates health by observing the overall state of the body, including the psychological aspects. TCM believes that the most common cause of sub-health is the imbalance of organ systems and attempts to correct the imbalance, to restore harmony to the individual. This prevents SHS from developing into more serious conditions or illnesses. TCM treatment modalities include herbal medicine, acupuncture and *tuina* massage.

Using herbs

TCM formulae have been found shown to successfully treat changes in pathophysiology associated with emotional distress and depressive-like behaviours caused by chronic stress. A trial found that TCM herbal extract granules could improve the quality of life for people with fatigue-predominant sub-health due to liver-*qi* stagnation and spleen-*qi* deficiency syndrome. It eases bodily pain and stimulates a positive mood.

Using acupuncture

A Cochrane review suggested that acupuncture and acupressure may help to improve sleep quality when compared to placebo. The combination of electro-acupuncture and back exercise might be an effective option in the treatment of pain and disability associated with chronic lower back pain. One study found that acupuncture and moxibustion have a therapeutic effect on chronic fatigue syndrome in 60 patients.

Talk to a qualified TCM practitioner for TCM health management tips. He or she can help diagnose the root problem, and depending on the nature of the problem, the physician may suggest treatments such as acupuncture and moxibustion, or make specific lifestyle recommendations.

About the author

Tay Ying Ru, Junie, is a TCM Physician of Hua Mei Acupuncture and TCM Centre. She graduated from Nanyang Technological University (NTU) with a double degree in Bachelor of Science (Hons) in Biomedical Sciences & Bachelor of Medicine (Chinese Medicine) from the Beijing University of Traditional Chinese Medicine. Ms Tay is a registered TCM Physician with the Singapore Traditional Chinese Medicine Practitioners Board, and a member of the NTU Chinese Medicine Alumni Association and Society of Traditional Chinese Medicine (Singapore). She has special interests in the use of Chinese medicine for the management of diabetes, renal and rheumatic diseases. She is effectively bilingual and possesses both TCM and modern biomedical knowledge.