

CHINESE MEDICINE

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SECTION

1

TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE AND HEPATITIS C

Introduction

Many people with the *hepatitis C virus (HCV)* turn to traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) for treatment. In the western world, TCM is often considered “alternative” medicine; however, in mainland China, Taiwan and other areas with Chinese origin, TCM is widely considered an integral part of the healthcare system and is often used as a primary form of medicine.

The term “TCM” is often used specifically within the field of modern Chinese medicine to refer to the standardized set of theories and practices in an organized system of training and education that was developed in the People’s Republic of China after the Chinese revolution in 1949. This term, TCM, is distinguished from the broader related traditional theories and practices preserved by Chinese people around the world. In this section, we will use the term TCM to refer to all the related practices of Asian-based medicines that have found their origin in China. Traditional Chinese medicine is the longest continually used and developed organized medical system in the world today.

TCM has a long history in the treatment of *chronic hepatitis*. *Hepatitis B* and *C* infections are prevalent throughout China, and the Chinese medical system has been dedicated to solving these problems for many years. The Chinese are working to eliminate sources of hepatitis and to develop treatments for chronic viral hepatitis using both TCM and western medicine.

At the International Symposium on Viral Hepatitis and AIDS held in Beijing, China in April 1991, more than 100 papers on viral hepatitis were presented. Several of these papers documented the positive results of studies involving Chinese herbal medicines. Studies on the use of herbal *antivirals*, and blood cooling and circulating herbs for liver damage repair were presented. These studies corroborated hundreds of years of treatment experience with Chinese herbs for the *symptoms* of hepatitis.¹⁻³ A 1995 literature review revealed there are at least 55 herbal formulas used to treat hepatitis.⁴ Some recent herbal studies from China and Australia showed positive results in chronic hepatitis C using herbal formulas similar to those widely used in the United States.⁵⁻⁷

In the United States, TCM is a popular *complementary and alternative medicine (CAM)* therapy among people with chronic liver diseases. TCM uses nutrition, acupuncture, heat therapies (such as *moxibustion*), exercise, massage, *meditation*, and herbal medicine to treat people infected with HCV. *Protocols* have been developed that have successfully helped people infected with *HIV* and HCV decrease symptoms, normalize or lower *liver enzymes*, and slow the progression of liver disease. A 1995 pilot study conducted among people coinfecting with *HIV* and viral hepatitis (B or C) at San Francisco’s Quan Yin Healing Arts Center indicated acupuncture alone might have an effect in lowering and/or normalizing liver enzymes.⁸

Chinese Medicine Philosophy

The primary goals of TCM are to create wholeness and harmony within a person thereby allowing the mind, body, and spirit to self-heal. Chinese philosophy states there are two opposing principles of life, yin and yang. Imbalances between yin and yang within a person can manifest as illness because the body is considered a microcosm of the world.

TCM defines the *physiological* components of illness using the concepts of *qi* (vital energy), *xue* (blood), *jin-ye* (body fluids), *jing* (essence), *shen* (spirit), and organ systems. Organ systems are domains within the body that govern particular body tissues, emotional states, and activities. TCM theory states the key to health is the internal ability of the body to remain strong. According to this theory, people are born with a certain amount of original *qi* (pronounced “chee”). The *qi* is easily depleted as the body uses energy and is not replaced.

It is difficult to increase the original *qi*. A person must work hard during life just to retain it. Exercise such as *tai chi* and *qi gong*, healthy eating, and good sleep habits are highly recommended for maintaining the original *qi*. If a person consistently lacks sleep, does not have a healthy diet, abuses drugs or *alcohol*, and/or has excessive or unsafe sex, he or she becomes *qi* deficient. When weakened and *qi* deficient, a person is more susceptible to infection by harmful external elements.⁹

Traditional Chinese Medicine and Hepatitis

According to TCM literature, people in China have experienced various *syndromes* associated with viral hepatitis for over 2000 years. This is because TCM diagnoses are based on *symptoms*, not on detection of *antibodies* to a specific virus. TCM treatments for these syndromes have been used over the past millennia and are generally considered safe and effective for all patients. Further, TCM recognizes that each person has a unique constitution and pattern of disease that exists in conjunction with the age-old syndromes. TCM contends that the best form of treatment is to modify, alter, or supplement base therapies to create an individualized treatment that meets each patient’s unique characteristics and needs.

Chinese medical theory states that viral hepatitis is not a singular disease, but includes a combination of *stages* and *syndromes*. The diagnosis and staging of HCV are accomplished using tongue diagnosis, pulse diagnosis, and questioning to determine if the patient’s initial western diagnosis is consistent with TCM theory.

According to TCM, the organ systems primarily disturbed in hepatitis are the liver and spleen. These disturbed organ systems affect digestion and energy. According to TCM, acute viral hepatitis is generally associated with excess damp heat or damp cold conditions. While a few people acutely infected with HCV may have symptoms, they are rare. The TCM stage at which one is diagnosed with hepatitis C is usually either the chronic stage of *qi* stagnation or the stage of *qi* and *yin* deficiency. Advanced chronic disease includes development of the patterns of *xue* stagnation and *xue* deficiency. All HCV infection is associated with *toxic* heat or the *li qi* or *yi qi* (the pestilence/epidemic factor).¹⁰

Traditional Chinese Medicine Therapy For HCV

In western medicine, extremely harmful external elements include severe bacterial or viral infections such as HCV and HIV. However, those terms are not used in TCM. Instead, traditional Chinese medicine, “... recognizes the existence of Pestilences called *li qi* or *yi qi*. These are diseases that are not caused by the climatic factors of Heat, Cold, Wind, Dampness, or Summer Heat dryness, but by external infectious agents... that are severely toxic because they strike directly at the interior of the body.” In the case of HCV, the particular pestilence is identified as toxic heat. Toxic heat is considered by TCM to be both an epidemic factor (something that is seen in a number of patients) and its own individual, treatable syndrome.¹⁰

The various modalities of TCM therapy include diet, massage, heat therapies, exercise, meditation, and acupuncture. Heat therapies include the use of moxibustion. Moxibustion is the burning of the herb mugwort over certain areas of the body to stimulate or warm these areas. Exercise therapy ranges from martial arts to more subtle forms of movement such as *tai chi* and *qi gong*.

Acupuncture is perhaps the most well known form of TCM in the United States. It is the art of inserting fine, sterile, metal filiform needles into acupuncture points on the body in order to control the flow of energy (*qi*). Acupuncture therapy can include electrostimulation and/or hand stimulation. This form of therapy is most appreciated for its ability to relieve pain. However, acupuncture is also able to help change body energy patterns, which promotes the body’s ability to heal itself of disease syndromes and symptoms.

In these treatments, TCM often does not distinguish energetic effects from *physiologic* effects. The different modalities of TCM have different aims. Some focus on balancing the body's energy, while others focus on building the physical body and adding substances to both balance and change the body materially. For example, the Enhance® herbal preparation used in HCV, as well as HIV, contains herbs to tonify the spleen qi and build xue. Qi tonification increases the amount of energy available for certain bodily function. Qi tonic herbs often have the specific effect of increasing digestion and food absorption. This increases the quality of the blood (xue).

Acupuncture is associated with balancing the body's energy levels, while herbal substances are more like drugs or foods in that they have specific physical effects. Breathing exercises are known to strengthen qi. One meaning of the Chinese word qi is air. By learning how to breathe correctly, more oxygen is made available to enter the bloodstream. Specific Chinese traditional therapies are discussed below.

Chinese Herbal Medicine for HCV

TCM herbal treatment for HCV depends on the stage of the disease and the syndromes involved. In my clinic and in the Chinese herbal formulas I have designed for use in hepatitis C, we use a combination of western research into the cause of hepatitis and its manifestations in conjunction with TCM traditional knowledge of combining individual herb into herbal formulas. We choose herbs for the formulas that have specific western effects for herbal formula development as well as the traditional usage of herbs used for centuries for the patterns associated with hepatitis. The modern Chinese herb formulas we end up with are formulas designed with the traditional complex organization specific to Chinese traditional herbal medicine in conjunction with modern herbal *pharmacology*. This creates balance and harmony within the formulas as dictated by traditional principles yet is guided by contemporary herb principles.

In the last several decades, Chinese medicine has developed two herbal medicine modern principles, Fu Zheng and Jiedu/Qu Xie. Originally developed for use in cancer in the 1970's, they are now used in treating chronic viral infections and other infectious disease.¹¹ Fu Zheng uses treatments to support the body's natural disease-fighting systems (that is, the *immune system*). Jiedu/Qu Xie, focuses on eliminating External Pernicious Influences (outside *pathogens*). In western terms, Fu Zheng and Jiedu/Qu Xie can be called immune-regulating and anti-*toxin* therapies. As the body becomes stronger, the disease itself can be controlled and the body can return to balance.⁹

Herbal medications in conjunction with rest and dietary recommendations can treat the symptoms of *acute hepatitis* fairly rapidly. Chronic hepatitis C is more difficult to treat. Research and experience both from China and from TCM clinics in the United States suggest that a one-year course of TCM therapy is the minimum needed to alter the progression of hepatitis C.

In our clinics, TCM therapy for chronic hepatitis C usually includes combinations of herbal preparations, which are often specifically designed for the disturbed organ system patterns. For example, the combination of Enhance® and Clear Heat® herbal formulas were developed for the treatment of HIV and other chronic viral disease using the concepts of Fu Zheng and Jiedu/Qu Xie. These formulas were tested in an herbal study at San Francisco General Hospital.¹² Hepatoplex One®, Hepatoplex Two®, and other herbal formulas have been designed specifically for the treatment of chronic hepatitis and related problems.

A few Chinese medicine practitioners in the U.S. have developed specific treatments for HCV and HIV infections based on these principles. Two such practitioners are Dr. Subhuti Dharmananda of Portland, Oregon and Dr. Qing-Cai Zhang of New York, New York (See *Chapter 11. 2, Modern Chinese Medicine* for additional information on Dr. Zhang's protocol.) My own experience treating people with HIV and HCV led me to develop the following herbal formulas. The formulas shown in Table 1 can be recommended and prescribed by licensed TCM practitioners and qualified herbalists. Special additional training in these herbal formulas and certification in HCV is given to licensed practitioners through the Quan Yin Healing Arts Center's Hepatitis C Professional Training Program along with the Misha Ruth Cohen Education Foundation.

Table 1. Examples of Chinese Herbal Formulas Used for HCV at Chicken Soup Chinese Medicine and Quan Yin Healing Arts Center, San Francisco, California

Indication	Herbal Formulas
Acute hepatitis C	Coptis Purge Fire® Clear Heat® Hepatoplex One® Ecliptex® Long Dan Xie Gan Tang
Chronic hepatitis C	Hepatoplex One® Hepatoplex Two® Ecliptex®
Immune disorders	Cordyseng® Cordyceps PS® Enhance® Tremella American Ginseng®
Toxic heat related to chronic viral inflammation	Clear Heat®
Digestive problems	Curing Pills Quiet Digestion®
Gallstones or gall bladder inflammation	GB6®
Liver inflammation and chronic hepatitis	Milk Thistle 80® / Silymarin (Karuna)
Qi Stagnation with Xue deficiency	Women's Balance®
Other	Milk Thistle 80® / Silymarin (Karuna)

Hepatoplex One® is used for acute and chronic hepatitis symptoms. It may be used when liver enzymes are elevated. It can be used with Clear Heat® to increase the Clear Heat® toxin-cleaning effect. It is designed to regulate qi, vitalize xue, clear heat, and clean toxin.

While there are herbs to help protect the digestion in Hepatoplex One®, this formula is usually used in conjunction with formulas that protect the spleen and stomach, as there are a number of herbs that are cooling or cold and vitalize xue. For example, to increase the effects of tonifying qi and yin, this formula can be taken with Cordyseng® or Cordyceps PS®. If there is spleen dampness and deficiency with loose stools, add Shen Ling®. If there is liver invading spleen, a common scenario in chronic hepatitis patients, you may add Shu Gan®.

To protect the yin in liver disease and specifically in chronic hepatitis, you may use Ecliptex®. For *immunodeficiency* disorders, you may add Enhance® or Tremella American Ginseng®. For xue stagnation including liver *fibrosis*, *cirrhosis*, and decreased blood circulation, add Hepatoplex Two®.

For xue deficiency and xue stagnation, or to protect the bone marrow during *interferon* plus *ribavirin* treatment, *chemotherapy*, or radiation, add Marrow Plus®. This formula is used for pre-treatment and during interferon/ribavirin therapy.

Hepatoplex Two® is designed to vitalize xue. When used in chronic hepatitis, it should be used in conjunction with other herbal formulas. Its special uses are for liver fibrosis and cirrhosis, and to decrease the size of an enlarged liver. It may also have an effect on splenomegaly (an enlarged spleen). As Hepatoplex Two® is a formula designed to vitalize xue, it should increase circulation of the blood and improve microcirculation in the capillaries.

Cordyseng® and Cordyceps PS® is used as an adjunct to other herbal formulas to increase the function of qi tonification and increase energy. The formula tonifies both yin and yang. It primarily strengthens the spleen, stomach, kidney, and lung, and helps digestion. It is especially good for the chronic fatigue found in chronic hepatitis.

Case Study Examples

A person presents with chronic hepatitis C with stage III fibrosis and grade II *inflammation*. He is preparing to go on interferon treatment in three months. The patient is fatigued. The tongue and pulse configuration match the Chinese diagnoses of toxic heat, damp heat qi and xue stagnation, and possible qi and xue deficiency. The recommended herbal protocol for this patient could be:

- Cordyseng® or Cordyceps PS®
- Marrow Plus®
- Hepatoplex One® and/or Hepatoplex Two®

A person presents with hepatitis C with stage 0 fibrosis and grade I inflammation. She has a very high *viral load*. The patient generally feels well. She has been advised to wait to try interferon therapy. The tongue and pulse configuration match the Chinese diagnoses of toxic heat, and qi stagnation. The recommended herbal protocol for this patient could be:

- Hepatoplex One®
- Clear Heat®

A person presents with hepatitis C with stage one fibrosis and grade two inflammation. The patient has lots of gas and digestive problems and fatigue is worse after loose stools. The tongue and pulse configuration match the Chinese diagnoses of toxic heat, spleen deficiency with dampness and qi stagnation. The recommended herbal protocol for this patient could be:

- Hepatoplex One®
- Shen Ling®

Acupuncture Therapies for HCV

TCM uses acupuncture extensively in the treatment of chronic hepatitis. Though some of the herbal theories already discussed may apply to acupuncture, the primary goal of acupuncture treatment is to readjust the body's qi in order to enable the body to heal itself. Therefore, acupuncture treatment can be used to treat both specific symptoms and a general epidemic pattern.

After a TCM diagnosis is given for a patient infected with HCV, an acupuncture treatment plan is developed by considering the epidemic nature of the disease, the individual's complaints, and any underlying constitutional TCM patterns of illness. On a symptomatic level, acupuncture treatments for HCV infection address digestive functions, appetite, energy level, stress, anxiety, *depression*, pain, and skin complications. Acupuncture has also been used to lower elevated liver enzymes as part of a chronic hepatitis protocol using special acupuncture points.⁸ Acupuncture can play a role in relieving side effects during interferon-based therapy.¹³

Moxibustion

An important part of TCM treatment in HCV is the use of moxibustion. Moxibustion is the burning of the herb mugwort (called moxa in Chinese) over certain points or areas of the body that correspond to acupuncture points. Moxa is rolled into a cigar-like stick or used loose over protected skin to create warmth and tonification. In Chinese studies, moxa has been shown to increase digestive function, *white blood cell* and *platelet* counts, and may have an effect on the transformation of *T cells* (one type of immune cell). Moxibustion is often used for pain syndromes and areas that appear or feel cold on the body. It is often prescribed for home use in treating both HIV and HCV infections.

Qi Gong for HCV

Qi gong meditation and exercise is a common practice in China. It is growing in popularity in the United States among people who have HCV, HIV and other life-threatening illnesses such as cancer. Many studies show the positive effects of qi gong on immune function.¹⁴⁻¹⁶ Many locations around the United States offer medical qi gong classes specifically designed for people infected with HCV and/or HIV.

Dietary Therapy for HCV

A healthy diet is considered a key part of maintaining qi and harmony in the body. Most TCM practitioners recommend that people generally eat a cooked, warm diet in order to strengthen the spleen and stomach. Other recommendations are based on the specific organ pattern diagnosis. For example, those suffering from chronic diarrhea may be advised to eat white rice (not brown) or barley daily, especially in the form of an easy-to-make rice porridge called congee or jook.¹⁷ A low *glycemic index* diet is also advised to control *insulin* resistance.¹⁸

Congee Recipes

Congee — or hot rice cereal — is often used in Chinese medicine for its curative powers and is often used by people during or after a long illness in which one is weak and may have difficulty eating. You can concoct many varieties using foods and herbs. Your Chinese medicine practitioner can prescribe those that are particularly suited for your constitution.

Basic Congee

Cook one cup of rice in seven to nine cups of filtered water for six to eight hours (with insulin resistance you may use whole barley as a substitute).

Variations

Add 1/4 cup of the following ingredients for every 1 to 1 1/2 cups of congee.

Mung bean - Mung bean congee cools fevers.

Aduki Bean - Aduki bean congee removes dampness, helps ease swelling and edema, and aids in treatment of bladder-kidney problems.

Carrot - Carrot congee eases indigestion.

Combining Eastern and Western Therapies

If you decide to use a combination of eastern and western therapies, you must discuss all of your treatment approaches with both your eastern and western practitioners. The use of some herbal therapies in conjunction with interferon-based therapy may be inappropriate.

In my experience, Chinese medicine can be highly effective for the management of side effects from medicines used in therapy. In my clinic, and through practitioners trained in the Hepatitis C Professional Training Program, we offer a special Optimum Interferon Protocol^{10,13} that can be used to prepare for and be used during interferon/ribavirin therapy.

Some people with HCV rely on both western and eastern diagnosis, are followed by their *hepatologist* for years, yet have only used Chinese medicine and other CAM therapies to manage their liver health as well as overall wellness.

Protecting your liver is key no matter what therapies you choose.

- Always tell all of your healthcare providers about each and every medication, herb, supplement, or other medicinal you are taking or using. This will ensure the safety of your overall health care plan, and will help you gain the greatest benefit from all of your treatment modalities
- Avoid anything that is toxic to the liver. A list of herbs and drugs that have known liver toxicity can be found in *Appendix IV*.

Summary

Many people with HCV are using TCM as either complementary or alternative treatment. TCM uses a number of therapies including acupuncture, moxibustion, Chinese herbs, qi gong, and dietary therapy. While these therapies have not undergone major *clinical trials* in the west, many of them have been used for centuries in China for hepatitis and other conditions. The results of modern Chinese research on herbs and other modalities are used in the development of current Chinese medicine treatments for HCV.

For recommended reading on traditional Chinese medicine, please see the *Resource Directory*.

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