

Treatment of Constipation with the Method of Strengthening Healthy Qi and Consolidating the Constitution Based on the Theory of "Healthy Qi Inside, Pathogens Cannot Invade"

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Abstract: As one of the common digestive system diseases, constipation presents a high incidence in modern society. Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) holds that constipation is mainly caused by exogenous pathogenic cold and heat, internal injury due to improper diet, emotional disorders, physical weakness after illness, deficiency of yin, yang, qi and blood, leading to stagnation of pathogens in the stomach and intestines, obstruction, weak propulsion, retention of dregs, and difficult defecation. The theory of "Healthy Qi Inside, Pathogens Cannot Invade" was first proposed in Huangdi Neijing. This paper aims to deeply analyze the internal relationship between this theory and the treatment of constipation, and elaborate on how this theory guides the syndrome differentiation and prevention of constipation from the perspective of strengthening healthy qi to eliminate pathogens. Through research, it enriches the cognition and treatment methods of constipation in TCM, provides clinicians with more comprehensive and systematic diagnosis and treatment ideas, helps inherit and carry forward the classic theories of TCM, makes traditional medicine better serve patients, improves the quality of life of constipated patients, and relieves their pain and distress.

Keywords: constipation; strengthening healthy qi; consolidating the constitution

1. Introduction

Constipation refers to a clinical symptom (or a group of symptoms) characterized by difficult defecation and/or decreased defecation frequency, dry and hard stools. Difficult defecation includes straining during defecation, difficult evacuation, anorectal obstruction, incomplete defecation, time-consuming defecation, and manual assistance. Decreased defecation frequency means less than 3 bowel movements per week. Chronic constipation is defined as a course of ≥ 6 months. With the accelerated pace of life, changes in dietary structure and increased pressure, more and more people are troubled by constipation. Long-term constipation not only affects patients' quality of life, but also causes anorectal diseases such as hemorrhoids and anal fissures, and even affects the cardiovascular and cerebrovascular systems. At present, the main treatments for constipation in modern medicine include laxatives, prokinetic agents and biofeedback therapy, but these methods have limitations. For example, long-term use of some laxatives may lead to intestinal dysfunction and drug dependence. TCM has accumulated rich experience in long-term medical practice, and its unique theoretical system and treatment methods provide many new ideas for the treatment of constipation. As one of the classic theories of TCM, this theory plays an important role in the understanding and treatment of constipation, and its specific guiding significance is worthy of in-depth exploration.

2. Origin of the Theory "Healthy Qi Inside, Pathogens Cannot Invade"

Suwen·Cifalun Pian first put forward: "Healthy Qi Inside, Pathogens Cannot Invade; avoid the poisonous qi". Ancient physicians had a profound insight into the mechanism of human health and disease occurrence. After thousands of years, it has become an important guiding ideology in the basic theoretical system of TCM for disease prevention and treatment. This theory has been deeply explained and widely applied in the works of many later physicians. "Zheng" refers to healthy qi, which is the sum of various substances and abilities of the human body to maintain normal physiological functions, resist the invasion of external pathogens and promote disease recovery. From the perspective of zang-fu organs, qi of the five zang-organs including heart, liver, spleen, lung and kidney, as well as qi of the six fu-organs that are interiorly-exteriorly related with them, are all part of healthy qi[1]. "Xie" means "unhealthy", generally referring to various pathogenic factors, which are divided into two categories. Exogenous pathogens originate from nature, including wind, cold, summer-heat, dampness, dryness and fire (heat). Under normal circumstances, they are climatic factors of nature, but when the climate changes abnormally, such as excessive or insufficient six qi or appearing at the wrong time, they become pathogenic six exogenous

pathogens, invading the human body and causing diseases. Endogenous pathogens are mostly produced by internal factors of the human body. For example, excessive emotions can lead to qi disorder, forming pathological states such as qi stagnation and qi rebellion, thus becoming pathogenic factors[2]. TCM believes that whether the body gets sick mainly depends on two aspects: healthy qi and pathogens. Healthy qi and pathogens are in a dynamic balance of mutual opposition and struggle. Deficiency of healthy qi leads to invasion of pathogens, and prevalence of pathogens weakens healthy qi. In the occurrence and development of diseases, the strength of healthy qi determines the prognosis of diseases. Strong healthy qi makes the disease easy to recover, while weak healthy qi leads to prolonged illness. "Healthy Qi Inside, Pathogens Cannot Invade" emphasizes that by maintaining and enhancing healthy qi, the human body is in a relatively healthy state that is not easy to be invaded by pathogens. Zhangshi Yitong states that "to treat deficiency pathogens, we should first take good care of healthy qi; if healthy qi exists, it will not cause harm. There has never been a case where pathogens do not retreat after healthy qi recovers, nor a case where life does not end after healthy qi is exhausted", all reflecting that protecting healthy qi is crucial in treating diseases[3].

3. Constipation Caused by Deficiency of Healthy Qi and Invasion of External Pathogens

3.1 Deficiency of Healthy Qi, Failure to Resist Pathogens

3.1.1 Weakened Promoting Function of Qi

The function of the large intestine to transmit dregs depends on the promotion of qi of the whole body. Lung qi, spleen qi and kidney qi are closely related to constipation. The dispersing and descending of lung qi help promote the downward transmission of dregs in the large intestine. When lung qi is deficient, its descending function is weak, and the transmission function of the large intestine is also weakened, leading to stagnation of dregs in the intestinal tract and constipation. Spleen qi transports and transforms food nutrients, providing power for intestinal peristalsis. If spleen qi is deficient, its transportation and transformation function is abnormal, qi and blood production is insufficient, the large intestine cannot be nourished by qi and blood, propulsion is weak, and dregs are difficult to excrete. Clinically, patients with prolonged illness, physical weakness, poor appetite and sallow complexion are often accompanied by spleen-deficiency constipation. Kidney qi also plays a crucial role in the transmission of the large intestine. The kidney is the congenital foundation and governs the two excretions. Kidney yang warms and promotes, promoting the transmission of the large intestine. If kidney yang is deficient, its warming function is weakened, transmission is out of control, and dregs condense in the intestinal tract, forming constipation. This is common in the elderly or patients with prolonged illness and weak physique, often accompanied by kidney-yang deficiency symptoms such as soreness and weakness of waist and knees, aversion to cold and cold limbs[4].

3.1.2 Deficiency of Yin and Blood, Intestinal Dryness

Yin and blood in healthy qi play a key role in moistening the intestinal tract. Feces can pass smoothly only when yin, blood and body fluids in the intestinal tract are sufficient. If yin and blood are consumed by prolonged illness, or excessive bleeding leads to deficiency of yin and blood, the intestinal tract loses moisture, feces become dry and hard, causing constipation. Manifestations include dry and hard stools, difficult defecation with effort, accompanied by deficient heat in the afternoon or at night, flushing cheeks, night sweats, etc. The treatment should be nourishing yin and moistening the intestines to relieve constipation. For example, some female patients often suffer from yin and blood deficiency constipation after postpartum hemorrhage or long-term excessive menstruation, manifested as dry and hard stools like sheep dung, accompanied by blood deficiency symptoms such as pale complexion, pale lips and palpitations[5].

3.2 Invasion of External Pathogens Inducing Diseases

Pathogens include two categories. Exogenous pathogens are cold, heat and dampness. Exogenous cold pathogen is characterized by congealing and contracting, which easily blocks intestinal qi movement. After invading the human body, it can lead to poor circulation of qi and blood in the intestinal tract, obstruction of transmission function, and retention of dregs in the intestinal tract that cannot be excreted smoothly, forming constipation. Manifestations include difficult and astringent defecation, spasmodic abdominal pain, cold hands and feet, preference for hot drinks, etc. Exogenous heat pathogen transforms into dryness internally, scorches body fluids, deprives the intestinal tract of moisture, and makes dregs dry and hard to pass. Heat pathogen disease has an acute onset, manifested as dry and hard stools, abdominal distension and pain, dry mouth and bad breath, thirst and preference for cold drinks, etc. Damp pathogen is sticky, heavy and turbid, easy to trap the spleen, affecting the transportation and transformation function of the spleen and stomach, leading to abnormal water metabolism and affecting large intestine transmission. Damp pathogen can cause intestinal qi stagnation, and damp pathogen

binds with dregs, making feces sticky and difficult to pass, forming constipation[6]. This is seen in people with humid living environment or long summer with humid climate. Such patients have sticky and unsmooth stools, difficult defecation despite the urge, and often a feeling of incomplete defecation after defecation.

4. Treatment of Constipation Based on "Healthy Qi Inside, Pathogens Cannot Invade"

4.1 Strengthening Healthy Qi to Treat the Root Cause

4.1.1 Method of Tonifying Qi and Promoting Transportation

For constipation caused by deficiency of healthy qi, especially spleen qi deficiency, tonifying qi and promoting transportation is an important method. The representative prescription is Buzhong Yiqi Decoction. Astragalus membranaceus, sweet and slightly warm in nature, acts on the spleen and lung meridians, tonifying the middle and augmenting qi, elevating yang and lifting prolapse, serving as the sovereign herb to strongly tonify spleen and stomach qi. Ginseng, Atractylodis Macrocephalae Rhizoma and honey-fried licorice, sweet and warm in nature, tonify qi, strengthen the spleen and harmonize the middle, assisting Astragalus membranaceus in tonifying qi, and act as ministerial herbs together. Citrus reticulata peel regulates qi and harmonizes the stomach, making all tonic herbs tonify without stagnation. Angelica sinensis nourishes blood and harmonizes nutrient aspect, and tonifying qi also helps produce blood. Bupleurum chinense and Rhizoma Cimicifugae elevate yang qi, assisting Astragalus membranaceus in lifting middle qi. The whole formula focuses on tonifying spleen qi, replenishing middle qi, enhancing the propulsion of large intestine transmission, restoring intestinal peristalsis, and treating constipation[7]. For patients with abdominal distension, add Aucklandiae Radix and Fructus Amomi to regulate qi and relieve distension; for those accompanied by middle qi collapse, increase the dosage of Rhizoma Cimicifugae and Bupleurum chinense to enhance the effect of elevating yang qi. Such targeted medication adjustment effectively improves constipation[8].

4.1.2 Method of Nourishing Yin and Blood

For constipation caused by deficiency of yin and blood, the main treatment idea is to nourish yin and blood to moisten the intestines and relieve constipation. Zengye Decoction is one of the representative prescriptions. Scrophulariae Radix nourishes yin and reduces fire, clears heat and moistens dryness, serving as the sovereign herb. Ophiopogonis Radix nourishes yin and moistens dryness, promotes fluid production and quenches thirst, strengthening the effect of nourishing yin, acting as the ministerial herb. Rehmanniae Radix clears heat and cools blood, nourishes yin and promotes fluid production. Combined with Scrophulariae Radix and Ophiopogonis Radix, it nourishes yin, increases fluid, moistens the intestines and relieves constipation. For severe blood deficiency, add Angelica sinensis and Rehmanniae Radix Preparata to nourish blood; for those accompanied by yin deficiency symptoms, add Anemarrhenae Rhizoma and Phellodendri Chinensis Cortex to clear heat and reduce fire. By nourishing yin and blood, clearing heat and moistening dryness, the intestines are moistened, transmission is restored, and constipation is relieved.

4.2 Eliminating Pathogens to Treat the Manifestation

4.2.1 Method of Clearing Heat and Purging

For heat-binding constipation, clearing heat and purging can quickly relieve symptoms. Maziren Pill is a commonly used formula. Cannabis Fructus moistens the intestines and relieves constipation, serving as the sovereign herb. Rhei Radix et Rhizoma, Aurantii Fructus Immaturus and Magnoliae Officinalis Cortex clear heat and move qi, attack and eliminate stagnation, acting as ministerial herbs. Paeoniae Radix Alba nourishes blood and harmonizes nutrient aspect, relieves spasm and pain; Armeniacae Semen Amarum descends qi and moistens the intestines. Both act as adjuvant herbs. Honey serves as the messenger herb to harmonize all herbs and moisten the intestines to relieve constipation. The whole formula moistens the intestines, clears heat, moves qi and relieves constipation, clearing intestinal heat accumulation and promoting waste excretion. For severe heat manifestations, add Scutellariae Radix and Coptidis Rhizoma to clear heat and dry dampness; for severe fluid injury, add Rehmanniae Radix and Scrophulariae Radix to nourish yin and promote fluid production, protecting human healthy qi and treating both manifestation and root cause[9].

4.2.2 Method of Regulating Qi and Promoting Stagnation

For constipation caused by liver depression and qi stagnation, regulating qi and promoting stagnation is an important method. Chaihu Shugan Powder is commonly used. Bupleurum chinense soothes the liver and relieves depression, serving as the sovereign herb. Cyperi Rhizoma and Chuanxiong Rhizoma assist Bupleurum chinense in regulating qi and soothing

the liver, acting as ministerial herbs. Citrus reticulata peel and Aurantii Fructus regulate qi and promote stagnation; Paeoniae Radix Alba and licorice nourish blood and soften the liver, relieve spasm and pain, and harmonize all herbs. The whole formula focuses on soothing the liver and regulating qi, smoothing qi movement, and naturally restoring the normal transmitting function of the large intestine. For severe constipation symptoms, add Arecae Semen and Magnoliae Officinalis Cortex to enhance the effect of moving qi and promoting stagnation; for qi depression transforming into fire, add Scutellariae Radix and Gardeniae Fructus to clear heat and purge fire, thus effectively improving constipation.

5. Conclusion

The theory of "Healthy Qi Inside, Pathogens Cannot Invade" plays an important guiding role in the treatment and prevention of constipation. Strengthening healthy qi and eliminating pathogens can fundamentally improve constipation symptoms and prevent the occurrence of constipation, which is of great significance for improving the comprehensive prevention and treatment of constipation. Healthy qi can be cultivated through regular work and rest, moderate exercise and adapting to seasonal changes; healthy qi can be protected through reasonable diet and eating more foods rich in dietary fiber and moistening the intestines to relieve constipation[10]; pressure can be relieved and emotions can be regulated by cultivating hobbies and adopting psychological adjustment to maintain the stability of healthy qi.

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