

## Endometriosis: the Chinese medicine explanation

Endometriosis results from the slowdown and stagnation of blood flow in the pelvis, according to Chinese medicine. This stagnation gradually becomes visible by laparoscopy as endometrial lesions.

This sluggishness in blood flow can be caused by a number of factors, and so during consultations Chinese doctors often ask about many seemingly unrelated issues (eg 'Do you become cold easily?'). This is because every individual case will be individually prescribed for, even though the basic underlying pathological mechanism remains 'blood stagnation'. There are usually other complicating factors in individual patients such as poor digestion, weakness in certain parts of the body, especially the Kidneys (which in Chinese medicine thought supports the whole reproductive system), general tiredness and tension.

Chinese doctors have learned that if these 'other' issues are not addressed, a patient may have a temporary improvement, but is quite likely to have a relapse sooner or later, because these factors may have been part of the precipitating scenario in the first place (eg 'Cold slowing the blood flow' or 'digestive weakness failing to supply sufficient blood').

Again, the habit of holding stress in the abdomen is an important factor in the cause of blood stagnation because the act of tensing the muscles tends to slow the flow of energy -- the 'qi' ("chee") -- which itself is involved in ensuring blood movement. Even low-grade tension, if frequent enough, can cause reduction in the flow of qi and finally sluggishness in blood flow resulting in eventual stagnation in the pelvis.

The next question to answer, then, is why in the pelvis, and not in the shoulders, where so many other people get soreness and aches from tension?

The Chinese medicine answer is that the Liver, which is sensitive to stress and responsible for moving qi throughout the body, has itself an acupuncture channel which runs directly over the ovarian area and then encircles the genitals before it runs down the thigh. Any impediment to energy flow here will cause backup across the numerous other channels that traverse the area, exactly like the traffic jam that results if a major traffic conduit becomes backed up.

Well, why not men? Men will tend to reflect this tension more in prostate and impotence problems, but it is the constant 'emptying and filling' of the 'uterine vessels' during menstruation that makes blood stagnation so much more of a problem with women.

So we suggest stress is a major factor. But what can we do about stress? It is out there, it is not something medicines can eliminate, so what can we do? Chinese agree that stress is part of life, but one's reaction to it can be more or less under control. A Chinese doctor will try to assist, with herbs or acupuncture, the coping abilities of a patient, while advising them to try to eliminate all unnecessary stress. In many cases the patient is able to significantly reduce their level of perceived stress, which we believe will also reduce the chance of further blood stagnation occurring.

## **Two basic types of endometriosis**

While every patient is unique, we have found that an essential distinction must be made between two basic types of endometriosis, because the treatment is substantially different in approach.

The two types can be called 'strong endo' and 'weak endo'. What is interesting is that these two types are often quite distinct even under laparoscopy.

The **strong endo** type is the classic endo picture: extensive active lesions all over the pelvis, severe pain which can last all month, heavy clotted periods and numerous attendant symptoms. These patients usually respond well to surgery at first, but may regress quite quickly even with hormone treatment. These are the patients for whom the strong blood-stagnation-removing type of herbal endometriosis treatment works best. The first essential step is to eliminate clotting during the period.

The **weak endo** type is the one that drives surgeons mad. These patients may have severe symptoms, intense pain and debility, but the laparoscopy finds only mild scattered endo, certainly not what they would expect to match the symptoms! Even more annoying from their point of view is that these types of patients frequently feel much worse after surgery, instead of feeling better.

From a Chinese medicine point of view, all of these phenomena are easily explained: a weak patient, one with 'blood deficiency', will have a weak blood flow that easily becomes blocked and stagnated. They also have fewer reserves to handle the pain and debility. Typically their periods will be scanty and brown-coloured, they will be tired most of the time and digestion will also be impaired, so that sufficient blood cannot be produced. This perpetuates the cycle of weak blood. Furthermore --- and this wedges Chinese with Western viewpoints --- their immune system will be weak, so they suffer repeated onslaughts of various problems which keep them down and their endo up. Very often endometriosis patients will report a history of glandular fever: most of these patients have this 'weak-type' endometriosis.

The treatment approach here is quite different to the strong-type, because strong blood-stagnation-removing herbs can be *too* strong; these types of patients require gentle blood-nourishing herbs to enhance the flow of blood, balanced by herbs to ensure that the digestion works well enough to 1) absorb the herbs themselves, and 2) begin to restore blood supply through properly-digested food. If the digestion is judged too weak for decocted herbs, pills may be used initially to build its strength.

### **Do Chinese and Western methods conflict or complement?**

Can I use Western medicine treatments while having Chinese medicine treatments?

Yes, they often complement. For example, a laparoscopy can precisely tell the location and severity of the endo lesions; it can also clear away extensive or severe lesions or adhesions more rapidly than herbs. This can greatly reduce the time needed for treatment and therefore the strain severe endometriosis may place on the body.

Chinese herbs can then be used to reduce any remaining lesions in difficult-to-reach places, such as the Pouch of Douglas, and also to restore normal circulation and

functioning within the pelvis and throughout the rest of the body. Chinese medicine is designed to take all of the symptoms into consideration -- they treat the patient, as an individual and as a whole, not just the condition.

Patients who find Western drug treatments onerous often opt for herbs as a substitute; or alternatively use the herbs *with* the drugs. The herbs can be designed to reduce the side-effects of the drugs, while enhancing the endo-clearing effect.

*Is a laparoscopy necessary?*

If one desires a confirmation that endo is present, a laparoscopy is necessary. It may also help to speed treatment as mentioned above.

However a laparoscopy is not absolutely required before action can be taken with Chinese medicine. For example, if endo is suspected from the symptoms and palpable areas of tenderness, one can begin Chinese herbal treatment on the basis of this. Many women prefer to know for sure whether or not they actually have endometriosis.

*How long is a consultation?*

30 minutes for the first consultation; subsequent consultations are usually 15 minutes or so to check on the response to the first herbal prescription and make any necessary alterations or adjustments.

A change of prescription is almost always required after a certain amount of time has passed, due to several reasons:

- a) As some symptoms clear up, others may then appear more prominent (eg if constipation was originally a major factor but the bowels become regular, or where there were several different types of pain involved at first, but following herbal treatment only a single type of pain remains which then requires a change of herbs to address).
- b) The body habituates (becomes used to) a prescription that originally worked well. This tendency is the bane of those who only have a single treatment for endometriosis: it may indeed work well for a while, but then ceases to help. The reputation for the great effectiveness of Chinese medicine rests squarely on its flexibility -- there are many approaches to treatment, and if one begins to be less helpful, another is designed to maintain progress.
- c) Circumstances change. These circumstances can be as crucial as grief or increased workplace stress, or as 'peripheral' as seasonal change, for example if a patient is temperature or weather-sensitive.

*What does a consultation involve?*

Thorough questioning about symptoms, for example details of periods; the nature, location, and timing of pain; 'unrelated' symptoms such as state of energy, digestion, and sleep; then examination of the pulse and the tongue. *There is no internal examination.* Details of Western examinations performed so far are required.

Patients are often surprised at the detailed questions and the level of bodily awareness expected of them (this awareness grows as one learns what to look for). The reason

for these detailed questions is that Chinese medicine diagnosis is based upon *how you feel* and *how you look*, rather than blood tests or tissue samples. Therefore it is quite important to notice and report sensations as accurately as possible. Herbs for pain in the central lower abdomen, for instance, are different than the herbs for pain on the sides; and again herbs for a stabbing type of pain may not work for dragging heavy ache. In another situation, if one notices (for example) that lower backache only occurs together with constipation, this observation can usefully shorten treatment time if recalled and mentioned at the consultation.

*What kind of treatment is it?*

Herbal and/or acupuncture. The options available are discussed with the patient and chosen by mutual consent.

Acupuncture would involve at least weekly sessions; herbal consultations are usually monthly, although with severe cases they may be more frequent.

The most effective herbal treatments are through a decoction, which means boiling individually-prescribed raw herbs and then drinking the resulting soup. Not always very palatable. (The taste of the herbs, as well as the time involved in cooking them, is often a major factor in patient compliance; the more convenient but rather less effective alternative of using pre-made pills or powders is a negotiable option).

*What about diet?*

Specific information is available during consultation. In general, a good common-sense balanced diet is best; Chinese medicine rarely advocates severe or overly-strict diets, but does recommend that cold or raw foods are reduced in favour of warmer, easier-to-digest things.

*How long is a reasonable course of treatment?*

At least 6 months, although patients should be improving as they progress. The most recent symptoms to appear are usually the first to go, and the most common statement heard in the early stages of treatment is 'I just feel better in myself!'. As a *very* general rule of thumb in Chinese medicine, we say that one year of problem will require one month of treatment.

*Will the endometriosis come back after TCM treatment?*

This is difficult to quantify without a major research project. Patients have shown clear of endo on laparoscopy following herbal treatment, and remained symptom free; while others have had recurrences after several years. Feedback in this regard is difficult because once patients feel normal again they are understandably loath to have another laparoscopy just to check the state of the endometriosis.

If prior menstrual irregularities are the major precipitating cause of the endometriosis, restoring a normal menstruation (i.e. pain-free, smooth-flowing, regular cycle) that persists after treatment is completed is a good prognostic sign. Clotting is an early warning sign requiring follow-up.

On the other hand, Chinese medicine holds that lifestyle is an important factor in endometriosis development, and that includes a patient's method of dealing with stress, diet, work patterns, etc. If problem areas can be identified and addressed, the chances are better that the endometriosis will not recur.

*How much does it cost?*

Herbal consultation and treatment average about \$100/month, but this cost is not yet rebatable except with a few private health funds (usually the smaller ones). The initial consultation is longer and therefore more costly. Acupuncture is \$45 a session, and is mainly performed in a course of six treatments.

*Can I get pregnant while taking Chinese herbs?*

As TCM does not aim at stopping the menstrual cycle, but rather at regularising it, trying to get pregnant is fine.

Plans in this area should be made clear at the first consultation.

### **Advantages & disadvantages of Chinese treatment**

#### **Disadvantages:**

Expense (Chinese medicine is not covered by Health Benefits)

Taste

Discomfort (eg in acupuncture)

Time taken to cook up herbs

No way to tell without surgery whether the endo itself is reducing.

#### **Advantages:**

A coherent explanation of the relationship between the patient's sensations and the nature of the disease can be provided. Although this explanation is not couched in Western medical terms, it provides insight and indications as to where lifestyle changes may be beneficial, and allows the patient to understand and trust the signals which their body manifests. This by itself is an important step toward the patient's regaining a sense of control over their own health.

Linked to this is the important factor of taking responsibility for, and taking active part in, the patient's own treatment. A patient has to work very hard with Chinese herbs, cooking and then drinking them, and monitoring their response. Not everyone is up to it, but many (even most) of those who are capable of sticking with it find Chinese herbs a rewarding process above and beyond the therapeutic results.