n Chinese medicine, the Kidney (organ-meridian system) is considered the foundation for good health and vitality. Medical herbalist, Paul Keogh explains how a range of herbal tonics can be used to support kidney function and strengthen Kidney energy to encourage optimal life expectancy.

The kidneys are responsible for fluid balance, waste elimination, regulation of blood pH and mineral balance. They also play an important role in red blood cell production, blood pressure regulation and converting vitamin D to its active form, calcitriol. In Western medicine we often think of the liver as the organ that underpins health through regulation of metabolism and detoxification. In Chinese medicine, however, the Kidney (with a capital ‘K’ to denote the organ-meridian system) is fundamentally more important as it is the source of the body’s constitutional or inherited energy and is regarded as the organ-system that governs the structural integrity and function not only of the kidneys themselves but also the adrenal glands, ovaries, testes, brain, spinal cord, skeletal structure (especially the lumbar region), teeth, anus, urethra and inner ear. The kidney system also governs body fluids, tissues (including bone marrow), homoeostasis and other substances produced by the kidneys, adrenals and sex glands, as well as reproduction, growth and the faculty of will power.

Interestingly, the areas governed by the kidney system are fundamentally affected by the ageing process eg. reduced energy, declining hormone levels, impaired brain function, bone weakness, hearing loss, loose teeth, weakened immunity, incontinence, tissue dryness and diminishing will power.

What causes a weak kidney system?

Kidney energy (traditionally called qi and pronounced “chee”) may be low from birth, but is also progressively depleted with age. It is particularly vulnerable to exhaustion due to factors such as overwork, a hard-driven lifestyle, insufficient fluid intake, multiple pregnancies and chronic illness or stress.

For most people by the age of 40 declining kidney energy is beginning to impact on their health. Unchecked, it can manifest as infertility, sexual dysfunction, mensopausal, anemia, prostate problems, impaired immunity, chronic inflammation, high blood pressure, heart irregularities, anxiety, loss of physical drive and poor concentration. Traditionally, Chinese Kidney tonics are taken to supplement declining kidney energy (Qi), replenish energy reserves (called ki stored in the Kidney system, nourish the body’s vital potential (called Ki) and strengthen the body’s vital functions (called Zhang) to promote and sustain good health and help prevent disease.

Although these Chinese terms may be unfamiliar in the West, they are easily explained. For example, Jing represents the body’s constitutional or inherited energy (also known as ‘life force’) as well as the reservoir for unused energy (Qi) extracted from the food we eat and the air we breathe. Jing also underpins the potential for energy (Qi) to flow through the meridians of the body, regulated by Yin (life’s opposing states of existence (called Qi) and Yang). This can be likened to the charge held in a battery, which is necessary for electricity to flow between the negative (Yin) and positive (Yang) terminals. In the body, Yin and Yang facilitate the flow of energy (Qi) through all 12 organ-meridian systems and regulate the body’s stable, internal environment.

Furthermore, Jing provides the energetic foundation for reproduction, development and maturation, and can be conserved and supplemented through healthy life practices, diet and herbs. The high number of centenarians (people over 100 years old) in China, estimated to be in the to over one million, is testament to the power of this multi-faceted approach, which combines physical exercise, such as Tai Chi, with a lifestyle where foods are used as medicine and medicinal herbs are used in food.

Traditional Kidney tonics

For thousands of years, Chinese medicinal herbs have been consumed to promote and support healthy ageing. Herbs with specific energetic properties are combined to tonify (restore and strengthen) the Kidney system, boost kidney energy and optimise kidney function. They include the following:

- Chinese foxglove: Chinese foxglove (Mertensia paniculata) tonifies Kidney (and Liver) Qi, replenishes Jing and nourishes the Blood in blood deficiency symptoms, including irregular uterine bleeding. Since the Kidney system governs the bone marrow where immune cells are produced, it is not surprising that Chinese foxglove has immune regulating activity and contains active components that have the potential to enhance bone formation by stimulating the production and activity of bone building cells (osteoblasts), while inhibiting the production and activity of cells that break down bone (osteoclasts).

- Horny goat weed: Research demonstrates that Kidney energy tonics, especially those that strengthen Yang, such as horny goat weed (Epimedium sagittatum), can help to promote healthy hormone function. Horny goat weed contains ginsenoside and diosgenin, which regulates endrogenic, and also icarin, which has shown potential for improving male sexual function by enhancing erecile tissue. Animal research suggests that horny goat weed promotes semen secretion and stimulates healthy activity of the prostate and testes. Horny goat weed also enhances bone health by reducing the breakdown of bone, and significantly improves the health of the reproductive, urinary, cardiovascular, circulatory, immune and blood producing systems.

- Goji berry: Another notable herb for strengthening the Kidney system is goji berry (Lycium barbarum). This is valued in Chinese culture as a tonic herb to promote improved energy, good vision and healthy function of the kidneys and liver. Recent studies show that extracts from goji berry possess biogallic activities such as anti-aging, anti-fatigue, immune regulation and cell protection.

Chinese dodder seed: Traditionally, Chinese dodder seed (Cuscuta chinensis) is used to strengthen Kidney Yin and Yang to assist with impotence, infertility, recurrent miscarriage, dysfunctional uterine bleeding (especially when the body is run down or during menopause), bladder weakness with incontinence, diminished vision and general weakness. Research suggests that Chinese dodder seed may also play an important role in healthy bone formation, as well as enhance immunity, reduce fatigue and increase the body’s tolerance to high altitude and low oxygen.

Cornelian cherry: Traditionally, cornelian cherry (Cornus officinalis) nourishes and stabilises the Kidney system to address many symptoms associated with overwork, exhaustion and aging, such as weakness, fatigue, impotence, infertility, dysfunctional uterine bleeding, dizziess, light-headedness, lower back soreness and weakness, tremors, blurred vision and incontinence. Animal studies of fruit extracts of cornelian cherry demonstrate significant effects on cellular energy production, blood sugar regulation and weight management.

- Chinese yam: Chinese yam (Dioscorea opposita) has been shown to possess anti-diabetic properties and the potential to reverse drug-induced insulin resistance caused by taking dexamethasone, a steroidal anti-inflammatory drug. Chinese yam may also help to regulate cholesterol and triglycerides to reduce the risk of developing heart and circulatory diseases.

- Traditional Kidney tonics in food: Chinese medicinal herbs foods are used as medicine and medicinal herbs are used in food. For example, Poria (Poria cocos) is used to address many symptoms associated with overwork, exhaustion and aging, such as weakness, fatigue, impotence, infertility, dysfunctional uterine bleeding, dizziess, light-headedness, lower back soreness and weakness, tremors, blurred vision and incontinence. Animal studies of fruit extracts of cornelian cherry demonstrate significant effects on cellular energy production, blood sugar regulation and weight management.

Water plantain and Poria: Water plantain (Alisma orientale) and Poria (Poria cocos) are two of Chinese medicine’s most respected fluid regulators, promoting healthy urination in people experiencing fluid retention. Because these herbs also strengthen the Kidney system, they are well suited to people who find conventional diuretics too harsh. In fact, when all the above mentioned herbs are combined together they promote healthy fluid metabolism, relieve fluid retention and reduce urinary frequency.

Together these herbs address the spectrum of symptoms indicative of low Kidney energy, such as fatigue and exhaustion, poor growth and development (even in children), weak bones and tendons, reduced sexual vitality and potency, menstrual irregularity, menopause and andropause, night sweats, light-headedness, mild diarrhoea, tinnitus, knee and leg weakness, lower backache, irritability, insomnia and poor eyesight.

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