



ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE

Acupuncture and the Treatment of Cystic Fibrosis

By Joanne Kemp BS, MAPA

Cystic fibrosis (CF) is a condition that is comprehensively managed by Western medicine, yet many people still complain of symptoms that are not resolved with the traditional regimes of antibiotics, physiotherapy and respiratory medications. Acupuncture is an alternative form of treatment that may provide relief from some of these symptoms.

Typically CF tends to affect both the lungs and the stomach, causing an excess of phlegm or mucus to accumulate, and the inability of both these organs to function normally. The lungs produce phlegm, which inhibits expansion and the uptake of oxygen into the bloodstream. The stomach and digestive system is unable to digest all nutrients from food, and thus the person finds it difficult to maintain weight and sustain high energy levels. This can also deplete the immune system, allowing bugs and infections to enter.

When thinking in terms of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), the effects of CF on the body are remarkably similar. Below is a summary of the TCM interpretation of these problems.

1. Kidney Deficiency

The body requires “Qi” (chi) or life energy to function. Without Qi the body dies. There are 2 sources of Qi

- a) Yuan Qi - we are born with this and it is a limited supply which we use up through life. It is stored in the kidney.
- b) Postnatal Qi - this is the qi that we continually make. It is made from air taken through the lungs, and food taken through the stomach.

We use a combination of these to live and function. As CF attacks the lung and stomach, the person is not able to make as much postnatal Qi; therefore he uses more yuan qi (remember it is a limited supply). This causes the person to become kidney deficient, as this yuan Qi is kept in the kidney. The kidney is also responsible for the regulation of fluids. If there is a deficiency in the kidney, there will not be enough fluid. Fluid is cooling and a lack of fluid can cause excess heat to accumulate in the body.

2. Lung Deficiency

We have already mentioned problems with the lungs as a result of CF. In TCM, the lung produces a thing called “Wei qi” which circulates around the outside of the body acting like the immune system and protecting the body from external invasions. These invaders are not only the well-known bugs and infections, but can also be invasions of cold and heat. When there is a lung deficiency these invaders can enter the body and cause increased phlegm. If the invader is cold the phlegm is white, if it is heat the phlegm is yellow.

3. Yin and Yang

For good health our bodies must have a balance of yin and yang. Yin is considered cold, dark, night, and asleep, while yang is hot, bright, day, awake. Because of the deficiency in the kidney and lung as mentioned previously, a yin deficiency can result. This leads to an imbalance in yin and yang, and too much yang. The person may then suffer from lack of sleep, feeling hot, yellow phlegm and the like.

Now that we know some of the basic principles of CF from a TCM perspective, we will use a case study to illustrate how acupuncture can help the person with CF.

“Jane” is a 25-year-old female with CF. She presented with the following symptoms

1. Kidney deficiency, which causes decreased energy, tiredness, and feeling hot due to, decreased fluids. This was Jane’s fundamental weakness.
2. Lung deficiency, not always but often, causing phlegm, invasion of bugs and invasion of external heat.
3. Yin deficiency, causing a feeling of heat inside, unable to cool down, problems sleeping. A yin deficiency also leaves bare patchy spots on the tongue - you can check yourself.

When treating Jane with acupuncture, it was necessary to address all these deficiencies. A typical treatment would initially address her fundamental weakness, the kidneys, and then also the lungs if needed. This would help with her energy levels and also in reducing phlegm. We would also boost her yin to assist in sleeping and staying cool. If there were an invasion of heat or bugs, these would be addressed. Finally acupuncture was used with Jane in reducing areas of local tightness and soreness,



especially in the chest, shoulders and neck.

Jane has noticed a considerable improvement in her energy levels, her chest tightness, the amount of phlegm and her lung capacity (as demonstrated in lung function tests). Her sleeping patterns are better after treatment, and her ability to stay cool, and her general feeling of wellbeing have improved.

Acupuncture will not cure CF; it will not change the underlying disease process. However it may offer some relief of some of the symptoms. Each person is different and may suffer from other problems not discussed, and will need an acupuncture treatment regime designed for them. Acupuncture is only an adjunct to Western medical management of CF, and is certainly NOT an alternative. But used in this way, it is worth pursuing as a possible means of achieving better health.