

## QI STAGNATION

This newsletter will discuss the aetiology, pathology, patterns and treatment of Qi stagnation. Qi stagnation is one of the most common pathological situations encountered in practice and this newsletter is aimed partly at clarifying certain misconceptions about Qi stagnation. The misconceptions regarding Qi stagnation that I would like to expose are:

- Qi stagnation is common but over-diagnosed
- Qi stagnation does not affect the Liver only but many other organs
- Qi stagnation is often secondary to Liver-Blood deficiency or a Kidney deficiency

These three theses will be clear as the discussion unfolds.

### AETIOLOGY

The aetiological factors of Qi stagnation are essentially only two, i.e. emotional or dietary.

#### EMOTIONS

Emotional stress is the major cause of Qi stagnation: whatever the emotion, they all upset the proper flow of Qi in the Qi mechanism and lead to Qi stagnation. In fact, Qi stagnation is the first result of emotional stress on the body; after some time, other pathogenic factors will gradually form, such as Fire, Phlegm-Fire or Blood stasis. Each emotion has a certain effect on Qi (e.g sadness depletes Qi, worry knots Qi, etc), but, after a short time they all lead to some Qi stagnation, even those that deplete Qi.

##### Anger

The term "anger" should be interpreted very broadly to include several other allied emotional states, such as resentment, repressed anger, feeling aggrieved, frustration, irritation, rage, indignation, animosity, or bitterness.

Any of these emotional states can affect the Liver, if they persist for a long time, causing stagnation of Liver-Qi if the anger is repressed or rising of Liver-Yang or blazing of Liver-Fire if the anger is expressed.

Anger may affect also the Stomach (if one gets angry at meal times or the Intestines (if one gets angry after meals).

Finally, anger, like all other emotions, also affects the Heart.

##### Worry

Worry knots Qi, which means that it causes stagnation of Qi, and it affects both Lungs and Spleen.

Worry, like all other emotions, affects the Heart too and initially it may cause stagnation of Qi of the Heart manifesting with sadness, an uncomfortable sensation in the chest, palpitations; the Heart pulse would feel very slightly Overflowing (compared to the other positions).

##### Pensiveness

Pensiveness consists in brooding, constantly thinking about certain events or people (even though not worrying), nostalgic hankering after the past and generally thinking intensely

about life rather than living it. In extreme cases, pensiveness leads to obsessive thoughts. In a different sense, pensiveness also includes excessive mental work in the process of one's work or study.

Pensiveness affects the Spleen and, like worry, it knots Qi.

#### Sadness and Grief

Sadness includes the emotion of regret, as when someone regrets a certain action or decision in the past and the Mind is constantly turned towards that time. Sadness and grief affect the Lungs and Heart. The Lungs govern Qi and sadness and grief deplete Qi.

Although sadness and grief deplete Qi and therefore lead to deficiency of Qi, they may also, after some time, lead to stagnation of Qi, because the deficient Lung-and Heart-Qi fail to circulate properly in the chest. This may cause symptoms of Qi stagnation in Lungs and Heart such as an uncomfortable sensation of the chest, a slight breathlessness, palpitations, a feeling of lump in the throat, and a pulse that is very slightly Tight or Wiry on both cun positions.

#### Shock

Mental shock scatters Qi and affects Heart and Kidneys. It causes a sudden depletion of Heart-Qi, makes the Heart smaller and may lead to palpitations, breathlessness and insomnia. It is often reflected in the pulse with a so-called "Moving" quality, i.e. a pulse that is short, slippery, shaped like a bean, rapid and gives the impression of vibrating as it pulsates.

Shock also "closes" the Heart or makes the Heart smaller. This can be observed in a bluish tinge on the forehead and a Heart pulse which is Tight and Fine.

#### Guilt

Guilt is an extremely common emotion and cause of disease in the West. Guilt affects the Heart and Kidneys and it causes Qi to stagnate. It may cause stagnation of Qi in the chest, epigastrium, or abdomen.

## PATHOLOGY

Qi stagnation is essentially a disruption of the Qi mechanism (Qi Ji) which means that it does not affect only the Liver but the Qi of any organ taking part in the Qi mechanism: it therefore affects the whole body Qi mechanism. What is the Qi mechanism? It is simply the flow of Qi in all organs of the body and all cavities, joints, skin, muscles, Fat, Membranes, etc. Implicit in the Qi mechanism is the flow of Qi in the proper direction in each place or organ: the flow of Qi in and out of organs, in and out of cavities, in and out of joints, in and out of the cou li, in and out of the mo yuan membrane, from Exterior to Interior and vice versa, etc. relies on a smooth flow and a flow in the right direction: from this point of view, the Qi mechanism is like a vast system of roads and motorways where traffic needs to be regulated by one-way streets.

Two essential movements of Qi need to be coordinated: the ascending and descending of Qi, and the entering and exiting of Qi. Thus, each organ's Qi should flow in a certain direction to ensure the smooth functioning of the Qi mechanism, as follows:

- I. Stomach-Qi flows downwards
- II. Spleen-Qi flows upwards
- III. Liver-Qi flows in all directions
- IV. Lung-Qi flows downwards
- V. Kidney-Qi flows downwards in some respect (sends turbid fluids down, holds Qi

down) and upwards in others (sends vapour from fluids upwards to Lungs).

- VI. Heart-Qi flows downwards
- VII. Intestines-Qi flows downwards
- VIII. Triple Burner Qi, like the Liver, also flows in all directions. More specifically, the Upper Burner Qi flows upwards, the Middle Burner Qi both upwards (to Lungs) and downwards (to Intestines and Bladder/Kidneys), while the Lower Burner Qi flows downwards

Thus, the smooth movement of Qi in the Qi mechanism relies on the proper ascending and descending of Qi in various organs and structures and also entering and exiting of Qi in and out of various structures, as outlined above.

#### The Triple Burner and Qi mechanism

The intricate movement of Qi in the Qi mechanism and its influence on the fluids metabolism is closely dependant on the **Triple Burner** which is also prone to Qi stagnation. Together with Liver-Qi, the Triple Burner controls the smooth and proper movement of Qi in all three Burners: in the Upper Burner, Qi goes up and exits and is under control of the Lungs; in the Middle Burner Qi goes up and down and in and out and is under the control of Stomach and Spleen; in the Lower Burner, Qi mostly descends and exits and is under the control of the Kidneys, Bladder and Intestines. The Triple Burner assists all the other organs in their functions and, in particular, it makes sure that all passages (of Qi or fluids) are open, that the various types of Qi flow smoothly, that the Yuan Qi emerges from between the Kidneys and assumes different forms in different places, and that wastes are excreted smoothly. Because of the Triple Burner's influence on Qi movement all over the body, it, like the Liver, is easily prone to Qi stagnation and for this reason, some of its points are important to move Qi (e.g. TB-6 Zhigou).

#### Stomach and Spleen as the axis

In the Qi mechanism and Triple Burner's passage-ways, the **Stomach and Spleen** occupy a central place, they are the central axis (Earth in the Centre), through which Qi passes on its way up or down from or to the Upper and Lower Burner. Thus, the ascending of Spleen-Qi and descending of Stomach-Qi are crucial to the smooth and proper flow of Qi and therefore metabolism of fluids too.

#### Liver and Lungs as outer wheel

The **Liver and Lungs** in coordination also play a crucial role in the smooth and proper flow of Qi in the Qi mechanism. If Stomach and Spleen are the centre, the axis, Liver and Lungs are the outer wheel and they are also coordinated like Stomach and Spleen are. The Liver is on the left (functionally, not anatomically) and its Qi ascends, and the Lungs are on the right and their Qi descends: the ascending of Liver-Qi on the left and descending of Lung-Qi on the right, complements and integrates the ascending and descending of Spleen-and Stomach-Qi in the centre.

#### The Heart and Kidneys as the root

Finally, the relationship and coordination between **Heart and Kidneys** completes the picture of Qi transformation. If the Stomach and Spleen are the axis and the Liver and Lungs the outer wheel, the Heart and Kidneys are like the root, the vertical axis along which Heart-Qi descends and Kidney-Qi ascends: this represent the harmonious meeting of Fire (descending) and Water (ascending).

### CONSEQUENCES OF QI STAGNATION

Qi is like a gas and when it stagnates, it is compressed: this may generate Heat and lead to Fire (of the Liver or Heart, usually), or it may eventually lead to Blood stasis. Since the free-

flow of Liver-Qi plays an important role in the fluid metabolism, Qi stagnation may also lead to Dampness and eventually Phlegm. Hence, the consequences of Qi stagnation are:

- I. Blood stasis
- II. Heat
- III. Dampness
- IV. Phlegm

## CLINICAL MANIFESTATIONS

The general manifestations of Qi stagnation are a feeling of distension; if there is pain, it is a pain accompanied by a feeling of distension and moving from place to place; a fluctuation of symptoms according to the emotional state, depression, moodiness, irritability, gloominess; and sighing. There are the general manifestation of Qi stagnation; others depend on the organ involved.

## LIVER

### **Clinical manifestations:**

- a) Feeling of distension of hypochondrium or chest, sighing, hiccup.
- b) Melancholy, depression, moodiness, fluctuation of moods.
- c) Nausea, vomiting, epigastric pain and distension, belching, abdominal distension, loose stools.
- d) Unhappy, wound-up, a feeling of lump in the throat, difficulty in swallowing.
- e) Irregular periods, painful periods, pre-menstrual tension, breast distension.

**Tongue:** tongue-body colour may not change: in severe cases, it may be red on the sides.

**Pulse:** Wiry, especially on the left.

Although we normally talk about Liver-Qi stagnation and stagnant Liver-Qi invading the Stomach or Spleen, we should differentiate **Liver-Qi stagnation** (or **depression**) from **Liver-Qi rebelling horizontally**: in the former case, the Liver has lost its free-flow and Qi stagnates, it does not move properly and accumulates; in the latter case, Liver-Qi is overactive and rebels horizontally towards the Stomach and Spleen. Thus, in the case of Liver-Qi stagnation, Liver-Qi is underactive and stagnating, in the case of Liver-Qi rebelling, Liver-Qi is overactive.

The symptoms of **Liver-Qi rebellious** are a feeling of distension in hypochondrium, epigastrium, chest, breasts in women, or abdomen. It often invades the Stomach and Spleen preventing Stomach-Qi from descending (causing nausea, hiccup, belching and vomiting) and Spleen-Qi from ascending (causing loose stools). Liver-Qi rebellious may be due to anger. The pulse is Wiry, which it may be only on the left.

The symptoms of **Liver-Qi stagnation** are very pronounced on the mental-emotional level: depression, moodiness, gloominess, unhappiness, despondency. On a physical level, there is also a feeling of distension of the hypochondrium, chest, epigastrium or abdomen, but also a feeling of oppression (men) in these areas. These symptoms are caused by a lack of free flow of Liver-Qi and therefore its stagnation. The pulse is also Wiry but it feels slightly different than the Wiry pulse of Liver-Qi rebellious; it is Wiry but it also lacks a wave and feels reluctant.

## LIVER-QI STAGNATION

**Treatment principle:** Soothe the Liver, move Qi, eliminate stagnation.

**Three Treasures remedy:**

- i) Release Constraint
- ii) Freeing Constraint (Women's Treasure)
- iii) Break into a Smile

## LIVER-QI REBELLIOUS

**Treatment principle:** Soothe the Liver, move Qi, eliminate stasis, subdue rebellious Qi.

## LIVER-QI STAGNATION WITH LIVER-BLOOD DEFICIENCY

Liver-Qi stagnation is often the result of Liver-Blood deficiency. We can deduce this whenever a patient has clear symptoms of Liver-Qi stagnation but the pulse is not Wiry and the tongue is normal or even Pale. This is due to Liver-Blood failing to hold Liver-Qi which stagnates. This is much more common in women: indeed, in women, this situation is more the rule than the exception.

**Treatment principle:** Soothe the Liver, move Qi, eliminate stagnation, nourish Liver-Blood.  
**Women's Treasure remedy:** Freeing the Moon.

## STOMACH

Qi stagnation in the Stomach is often caused by rebellious Liver-Qi but it may also arise independently. The aetiology is usually emotional problems at meal times, i.e. getting angry at meal times or eating in a hurry, eating while worried and under stress at work, going straight back to work after eating, or even eating at one's desk while working, eating too fast, etc.

**Clinical manifestations:** Bad digestion, a feeling of fullness, pain and distension of the epigastrium, belching, nausea. Tongue: may not change. Pulse: Wiry or Tight on the right guan.

**Treatment principle:** Restore the descending of Stomach-Qi, move Qi, eliminate stagnation, calm the Mind.

**Three Treasures remedy:** Open the Heart.

## INTESTINES

This nearly always occurs with Liver-Qi and/or Spleen-Qi stagnation and is due to dietary irregularity with stress.

**Clinical manifestations:** Abdominal distension, fullness and pain, constipation with bitty stools.

**Three Treasures remedy:** Break into a Smile, Smooth Passage.

## LUNGS

The Lungs are affected by worry and pensiveness which knot Qi and lead to Qi stagnation. They are also affected by sadness and grief which initially deplete Qi in the chest; after some time, this will lead to Qi stagnation in the chest. Stagnation of Lung-Qi in the chest (and throat where the Lung channel flows) is an important pathogenic factor in several conditions: goitre, plum-stone syndrome, some upper digestive problems (such as oesophagitis), some respiratory problems such as breathlessness, some voice problems such as hoarse voice, breast lumps and breast cancer.

**Clinical manifestations:** Sighing, slight breathlessness, a feeling of tightness or oppression of the chest, a feeling of lump in the throat, difficulty in swallowing (or a feeling of difficulty of swallowing), sour regurgitation, belching, burning in the oesophagus at night, depression, crying, sadness, easily affected by other people's influence, a feeling of energy rising in the chest.

**Tongue:** unchanged. Pulse slightly Tight on the Lung position, without wave if due to sadness.

**Treatment principle:** Resolve the descending of Lung-Qi, calm the Mind and the Corporeal Soul (po).

**Three Treasures remedy:** Open the Heart.

## HEART

Qi stagnation of the Heart occurs from emotional problems such as sadness, worry and grief. However, since all emotions affect the Heart, it is not surprising that any emotion may cause Heart-Qi stagnation. This may also be due to shock or guilt.

**Clinical manifestations:** Palpitations, slight breathlessness, a feeling of oppression and tightness under the heart region, sadness, depression, anxiety, a vague mental restlessness, an uncomfortable feeling in the throat from energy rising ("heart in throat"), upper digestive problems (such as oesophagitis).

**Tongue:** slightly red tip. Pulse: slightly Overflowing or Tight in Heart position (compared to other positions).

**Treatment principle:** Restore the descending of Heart-Qi, calm the Mind, tonify the Heart.

**Three Treasures remedy:** Open the Heart.

Table 1. lists the main remedies for Qi stagnation.

Remedy	Pattern	Disease	Notes
Release Constraint	Liver-Qi stagnation	Depression	The remedy for mental depression from Qi stagnation
Freeing Constraint	Liver-Qi stagnation	Pre-menstrual syndrome	Pre-menstrual syndrome of Full type from Liver-Qi stagnation
Freeing the Moon	Liver-Qi stagnation, Liver-Blood deficiency	Pre-menstrual syndrome	Pre-menstrual syndrome of Full/Empty type
Free Flow	Liver-Qi stagnation	Painful periods	
Free-Flowing Sea	Liver-Qi stagnation, Liver-Blood deficiency, Kidney deficiency	Pre-menstrual syndrome	Pre-menstrual syndrome of the Empty type
Break into a Smile	Liver-Qi stagnation	Abdominal pain	The remedy for abdominal pain from Qi stagnation
Freeing the Sun	Liver-Qi stagnation, Liver-Heat	Various	
Smooth Passage	Liver-Qi stagnation, Spleen-Qi deficiency, Dampness in the Lower Burner	Irritable bowel syndrome	Lower Burner

Soothe the Centre	Liver-Qi stagnation, Spleen-Qi deficiency, Dampness in the Middle Burner	Epigastric disturbance	Middle Burner
Open the Heart	Stagnation of Qi of the Lungs and Heart	Chest discomfort	Chest

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