

BREAST LUMPS AND THE "LIVER CONNECTION"

An Option from Traditional Chinese Medicine

Breast lumps or cysts are the most common reason for women to seek medical consultation in Sweden. Like every other part of our bodies, our breasts are subject to various types of problems. Breast lumps can occur in women of any age, but are more common in middle age. Although the majority of breast lumps are benign or non-cancerous, women still experience the discomfort of tenderness, pressure or distention within the breast. Conventional medicine provides women with a variety of treatments for breast lumps. Traditional Chinese medicine, which has accumulated abundant experience and knowledge in treating and preventing breast lumps over its long history, is another option for achieving and maintaining healthy breast tissue.

Understanding Breast Lumps

Breast lumps fall into two categories: benign lumps or cysts, and malignant tumors. Breast lumps are frequently, but not always, associated with the conditions of premenstrual breast distention, infertility, irregular periods, and menopausal syndrome.

Breast Cysts are fluid-filled sacs that may develop in the breast. Breast cysts may cause breast pain. The most common conventional medical interventions are to withdraw fluid from the cyst with a needle, or to surgically remove the cyst if necessary.

Fibrocystic Breasts normally contain small, nodular lumps and cysts. Most of these lumps and cysts are located in the upper, outer area of the breasts. Although most women with fibrocystic breasts do not have an increased risk of developing breast cancer, women who have fibrocystic breasts are more likely to develop breast cysts.

Fibrous Breast Lumps are small, solid, non-cancerous lumps that are composed of fibrous and glandular tissue. Fibrous breast lumps usually appear in young women. These lumps can be removed surgically, but they often recur.

Breast Cancer is a malignant, hard, stony lump or mass in the breast. Breast cancer may start from the milk glands, milk ducts, fatty tissue, or connective tissue. Statistics indicate that one out of eight women will develop breast cancer at some time in her life. Conventional treatments include surgery, radiation therapy, chemotherapy, and hormone-blocking drugs.

In traditional Chinese medical theory, benign breast lumps or cysts are classified as Ru Pi (breast nodule), while malignant breast tumors are classified as Ru Yan (breast stone). Even the earliest Chinese medical literature had records for diagnosing and differentiating the patterns of both Ru Pi (breast nodule) and Ru Yan (breast stone). In the following section, we will focus exclusively on non-cancerous breast lumps.

Chinese medicine believes that the diagnostic pattern called "Liver Qi Stagnation" is the mechanism primarily responsible for the development of breast problems, including breast lumps. In traditional Chinese medicine, the two main functions of the Liver are to store the Blood and to regulate Qi. The Liver regulates Qi by promoting its free flow, and encouraging smoothness of flow. When the Liver is dysfunctional, Qi does not flow freely and smoothly, and Liver Qi Stagnation is one result. Chinese medicine considers emotions to have a very powerful effect on the functioning of the internal organs, and strong or unresolved emotions can damage the organs with which they are associated. Although anger is the primary emotion associated with the Liver, the Liver is responsible for keeping all the emotions in a state of smooth flow. Therefore, when there is emotional stress or psychic trauma, and the Liver is overwhelmed, several types of Liver dysfunction can result, among which is Liver Qi Stagnation. Among the possible Liver disorders, Liver Qi Stagnation stands out sharply as the main cause of breast lumps. One reason for this is that the Liver meridian (energy pathway) is connected by internal pathways to the breasts. Liver Qi Stagnation based in emotional stress is especially common among women, and traditional Chinese gynecology places a lot of emphasis on keeping the Liver on an even keel. Regulating the Liver, soothing the Liver, cleansing the Liver, calming the Liver, and softening the Liver through Chinese herbal medicine, acupuncture and dietary therapy are common treatment strategies in the practice of traditional Chinese medicine gynecology.

Patterns of Breast Lumps and Leading Herbs for Treatment

The following four patterns are differentiated for non-cancerous breast lumps.

- **Qi Stagnation.** Emotional problems are the main cause of this pattern of breast lumps. Symptoms of this pattern include: growing lumps with dull pain; enlarging or shrinking lumps with emotional disturbance; depression; a feeling of distention under the rib cage; a thin white tongue coating; and a wiry or thin-choppy pulse. The leading Chinese herbs for treating this pattern include immature tangerine peel (Qing Pi), buplerum (Chai Hu), nut-grass rhizome

(Xiang Fu), melia fruit (Chuan Lian Zi), and vaccaria seed (Wan Bu Liu Xing).

- **Phlegm Accumulation.** The excessive consumption of dairy products, fats and sweets leads to this pattern of breast lumps. Symptoms of this pattern include: variably-sized lumps with no pain or slight pain; dizziness with a feeling of heaviness; no appetite; thick or puffy tongue body; and a deep, wiry and slippery pulse. The leading Chinese herbs for resolving Phlegm include atractylodes (Bai Zhu), poria (Fu Ling), and Job's tears (Yi Yi Ren).
- **Excessive Heat.** The habitual consumption of greasy, hot, spicy foods, deep fried foods and alcohol, or long-standing anxiety or anger lead directly to the Excessive Heat pattern of breast lumps. Symptoms of this pattern include: lumps with burning pain; irregular periods; hot flashes; anxiety; dizziness; disturbing dreams; red tongue tip; and a deep-thin-wiry-rapid pulse. The leading Chinese herbs for eliminating the Excessive Heat pattern include peony bark (Mu Dan Pi), gardenia (Zhi Zi), gentiana (Long Dan Cao), coptis (Huang Lian), and skullcap (Huang Qin).

Chronic Disharmony. Chronic illness, or slow recovery from surgery or childbirth are the sources of the Chronic Disharmony pattern of breast lumps. Symptoms of this pattern include: growing and disappearing lumps with menstrual cycles; breast distention; irregular periods; lassitude; dark eyelids; insomnia; back pain; pale-red tongue; and "soggy" pulse. The leading Chinese herbs for balancing the Chronic Disharmony pattern include astragalus (Huang Qi), rehmannia (Di Huang), angelica (Dang Gui), and Fu Ti (He Shou Wu).