

## CHINESE HERBAL APPROACH TO BREAST CANCER

According to current scientific theory, breast cancer is believed to result from a series of alterations in the genes of breast cells. A cancerous tumor may develop for several years before it can be detected. Signs and symptoms of breast cancer include a lump, swelling, discharges from the nipple, tenderness, indentation of the nipple, or a dimpled appearance of the breast skin.

The most frequently-cited factors in developing breast cancer are hormones, age, and family history. The risk of breast cancer increases with age. Statistics on the relative risk of developing breast cancer with age show that one woman in 19,608 at the age of twenty-five, one woman in 50 at the age of fifty, and one woman in ten at the age of eighty develops breast cancer. Women who began menstruation early (age 11 or younger) or who reach menopause late (age 55 or older) are at higher risk for breast cancer. Some women inherit genes that are more susceptible to the alterations that can lead to breast cancer.

Today, the standard therapies for breast cancer include surgery, radiation therapy, chemotherapy, hormone therapy, and autologous bone marrow transplants. These therapies are often used in combination, and they are the best hope for breast cancer sufferers. But these powerful treatment modalities also produce significant side effects, and coping with the side effects can be as emotionally difficult as coping with the cancer itself. It is precisely in this area of dealing with the side effects of cancer therapy that traditional Chinese medicine is most useful and effective. The combination of acupuncture, herbal medicine and dietary modifications can greatly improve the overall health and well-being of the cancer patient. In China, this marriage of modern Western therapies with ancient healing techniques is the normal approach to treating cancer.

### Breast Cancer in Chinese Medicine

In classical traditional Chinese medical literature, breast cancer is called "Ru Yan," or "breast stone." Chinese medicine believes that the fundamental cause of breast cancer is emotional disturbances such as excessive thinking or anger, which lead to functional disorders of the Liver and Spleen. A common causative pattern is that excessive Heat from a deficient Liver, combined with Phlegm Dampness due to Spleen dysfunction, results in the blockage of Chi and Blood, which then "condenses" into breast cancer. Another common causative pattern is when Liver Deficiency and Kidney Deficiency lead to Chi and Blood Deficiency. Chronic Chi and Blood deficiency then leads to Qi Stagnation and Blood Stasis, which causes the formation of lumps in the breast. A third pattern is when Qi

Stagnation and Phlegm accumulation lead to excessive Heat toxins, which then turn to hard breast lump masses.

Breast cancer was believed to be one of the "four fatal diseases" in traditional Chinese medicine before the modern surgical operations, chemotherapy, and radiation therapy were invented. The condition of "breast stone" was diagnosed and treated, of course, with traditional surgery, acupuncture, and herbal formulas, but the results were often disappointing. However, the Chinese tradition of close observation and painstaking collation of symptoms and cures provides us with extensive information on the diagnosis and treatment of breast cancer.

Traditionally, four patterns of breast cancer are differentiated and treated: Liver Qi Stagnation (hard masses without pain and redness); Phlegm Heat Obstruction (hard masses with sharp pain and redness and swelling); Liver Kidney Deficiency (hard lumps with swelling and a dimpled appearance of the breast skin, discharges and indentation of the nipple); Qi Blood Deficiency (hard lumps with swelling, ruptured abscesses, spreading to the surrounding areas).

### **Herbal Approach to Breast Cancer**

Modern research on herbal treatment for cancer-related health issues has produced evidence that the following traditional Chinese medicine herbs are very effective when used by experienced practitioners. They represent four areas of treatment that are particularly important to breast cancer patients.

1. **Herbs for Depressing Cancer Cells:** The leading herb in this category is *Tulipa edulis* (Shan Ci Gu). The active ingredient in *T. edulis* (Shan Ci Gu) is colchicine.
2. **Herbs with Anticancer Properties:** The herbs in this group include herbs for cleansing the body of Heat toxins such as *odlenlandia* (Bai Hua She She Cao), *lobelia* (Ban Zhi Lian), and *rhizoma paridis* (Qi Ye Yi Zhi Hua); and herbs for eliminating Blood Stasis such as *rhubarb* (Da Huang), *notoginseng root* (Tian Qi), *bugleweed* (Ze Lan), and *pycnostelma* (Xu Chang Qing).
3. **Herbs for Immunity:** Immune system enhancing herbs include *astragalus* (Huang Qi), *ligustrum seed* (Nu Zhen Zi), *cordyceps sinensis* (Dong Chong Xia Cao), *gynostemma pentapphyllum* (Jiao Gu Lan), *polyporus* (Zhu Ling), and *reishi* (Ling Zhi).
4. **Herbs for Preventing Alterations:** Three herbal seeds have the function of preventing the alterations in breast cell genes that

can lead to cancer: ligustrum seed (Nu Zhen Zi), cuscuta seed (Tu Si Zi), and lycii fruit (Gou Qi Zi).

### **TCM Patterns Seen After Conventional Therapies**

Once a woman has been diagnosed with breast cancer, and depending on what stage the cancer is in, the following standard treatments are recommended: Surgery (lumpectomy, simple mastectomy, modified radical mastectomy) removes the cancer and some or all of the surrounding tissue. Radiation therapy uses high-powered X-rays to kill cancer cells and shrink tumors. It helps to prevent the recurrence of cancer. Chemotherapy uses powerful anticancer drugs to destroy cancer cells that invade other parts of the body. Hormone therapy uses estrogen-blocking drugs such as tamoxifen to prevent estrogen from binding to cancer cells and stimulating the cancer cells to grow. Autologous bone marrow transplant (for extremely aggressive breast cancers) removes the bone marrow, makes sure it is free of cancer, and then injects it back into the body after the high-dose chemotherapy regimen is complete. Statistics indicate that the overall mortality rate from breast cancer has not changed appreciably in forty years, despite new drugs and surgical techniques, according to Dr. Christianne Northrup. For patients who choose conventional therapies, the side effects of these therapies must always be addressed. Patients are best served by having a speedy recovery from cancer therapy, and by having a strong health maintenance program after recovery. In China, the vast majority of cancer patients use traditional Chinese medicine along with conventional therapies during and after cancer treatment. In this country, more and more cancer patients are discovering the benefits of complementary care.