

Reducing the Side Effects of Cancer Chemotherapy with Chinese Medicine

Chemotherapy is one of the conventional therapies used to treat cancer. The doses and schedules of chemotherapy drugs are designed so that the drugs will kill the rapidly dividing cancer cells and then be expelled from the patient's body before they can damage most healthy cells (which divide more slowly). However, three types of normal cells also divide rapidly: the cells that make up the interior lining of the intestinal tract, hair producing cells and the bone-marrow cells. These three normal cells are also affected by the chemotherapy drugs. This causes the three most common side effects: nausea and vomiting, hair loss, and bone-marrow depression. Other side effects include, dry flaky skin, blood clotting, fatigue, infections, depressed immune systems and possible sterility.

Why Chinese Medicine?

Statistics show that almost all cancer patients who are treated with chemotherapy or radiation, look for a complementary therapy treatment. Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) has developed a model of integrating conventional medicine's powerful drugs and instruments to kill cancer cells with a holistic approach to address the side effects. TCM is a pattern differentiation-based functional medicine. Meaning, that a TCM practitioner understands the model of pathological mechanisms, the organs involved (such as the liver, lungs, heart and spleen) and the patterns that are created as a result. For example; Skin-mucous reactions such as dry skin, ulceration, hair loss, local pain, discoloration are caused by toxic heat and exhaustion of body fluids. By grouping the key and general symptoms of a patient's reactions to chemotherapy, a TCM practitioner makes a diagnosis of pattern defined, such as toxic heat or dampness and treats the pattern accordingly.

TCM Treatment

There are varieties of TCM treatment tools to reduce the side effects of chemotherapy for patients. The most important treatment tools are Chinese herbs and acupuncture. Some herbs often prescribed include astragalus (Huang Qi), Peony (Bai Shao), and honeysuckle (Jin Yin Hua) which are some leading herbs for tonifying qi (or energy), nourishing blood and clearing toxic heat, respectively. However, a professional Chinese medicine practitioner usually prescribes an herbal formula (which is more potent and specific) based on a patient's pattern differentiation. Acupuncture or acupressure on points such as Neiguan (Pericardium 6), which is located two Cuns above wrist, is very effective for cancer chemotherapy-induced nausea and vomiting.

Research Support

A joint study conducted by researchers and medical doctors at the China Academy of Traditional Chinese Medicine, the Beijing Ob/Gyn Hospital, the China-Japan

Friendship Hospital and the Beijing Neurosurgery Institute, investigated the regulatory function of acupuncture on the immune system response of patients treated by chemotherapy and radiation therapy. The results of the study showed that acupuncture can strengthen and regulate the immunity of cancer patients, and significantly lessen the side-effects of chemotherapy and radiation therapy. Another study from China showed that moxibustion on the back acupuncture points can significantly increase the white blood counts for cancer patients of middle and late stages.

The National Institute of Health (NIH) assembled a consensus conference to endorse acupuncture in 1997. After analyzing studies and interrogating practitioners, the panel was convinced that acupuncture is clearly effective for nausea and vomiting from chemotherapy and anesthesia.

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