

It's Good to Poke Your Tongue Out

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One of the essential elements of making a Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) diagnosis is to look at a patient's tongue.

It can be a moment of light relief after discussing the details of a patient's condition. Children usually enjoy this part of the consult, although some are reluctant and need reassurance that in this case it is all right to poke your tongue out when your parents are watching.

The first thing to observe is the colour of the tongue body. A normal colour is pale red.

A very pale tongue body can indicate a Blood (Xue) or Yang Deficiency. Tiredness and lethargy are hallmarks of a pale tongue.

At the other end of the spectrum is a very red tongue. In TCM a red colour reflects Heat. In children, the Heat could indicate a fever or irritability. In adults, the red tongue and Heat are often indicative of unresolved illnesses, either from childhood or later bouts of flu or gastro intestinal diseases.

Chronic conditions, often involving pain, will cause the tongue body colour to become a shade of purple.

The next aspect of the tongue to observe is the shape of the tongue body. A slightly swollen tongue body reflects an Energy (Qi) Deficiency. A thin dry tongue reflects a lack of fluids in the body. Overwork or having too many children will consume your body's essential fluids and can result in a dry tongue.

A tongue that deviates to the side when extended could indicate a previous stroke. While a quivering tongue is a feature of Internal Wind, a TCM concept that includes severe migraines or conditions with tremors.

After assessing the colour and shape of the tongue, we look at the coat on the surface of the tongue. The coat can be from a very sparse coat to a thick dirty coat. It reflects the state of the digestive system.

No coat indicates extreme Dryness (Zao) while a thick coat indicates an accumulation of Dampness (Shi) or stagnant and undigested food. Bloating and fullness after eating or an irregular appetite can be the result accumulations in the Stomach and Intestines and result in a thick coating on the tongue.

Finally, when observing the tongue, the TCM practitioner will look at specific areas of the tongue.

The front tip can reflect conditions of the Heart. A bright red tip results from Heart Fire and involves insomnia and anxiety.

The sides of the tongue reflect some Liver and Gallbladder conditions. In TCM these usually relate to irregular energy patterns, premenstrual tension or emotional ups and downs.

The Lungs are reflected in the front third of the tongue and common colds and sore throats often show up as redness in this area.

The middle of the tongue shows the state of your digestion, along with the coat over this area.

And the rear of the tongue reflects the Kidneys, Urinary Bladder and Intestines. Dryness in this area can mean constipation or urinary problems.

So how would we describe the perfect tongue in TCM? The description seems inscrutably Chinese. Not too pale and not too red, not too thin and not too fat, with a moist thin coat.

Although the tongue qualities can point to numerous illnesses and disharmonies, it is only part of a comprehensive TCM diagnosis. And for that you need to see a qualified TCM practitioner. A national referral list can be found on the Australian Acupuncture and Chinese Medicine Association website at: www.acupuncture.org.au <<http://www.acupuncture.org.au>> .

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