

# Research Progress on Traditional Chinese Medicine Treatment of Functional Constipation

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**Abstract:** With changes in people's lifestyles and dietary habits, constipation has gradually become a common condition in social life. Constipation is primarily characterized by symptoms such as prolonged bowel movement cycles, hard stools, reduced frequency of bowel movements, difficulty in defecation, and a sense of incomplete evacuation. It may also be accompanied by symptoms such as abdominal bloating, abdominal pain, and bad breath. Constipation not only leads to anorectal diseases but, in severe cases, may also affect patients' physical and mental health, causing depression, anxiety, and other issues. Clinically, constipation can be classified into functional constipation and organic constipation. This article primarily discusses functional constipation. Although there is no dedicated chapter on constipation in the *Huangdi Neijing*, there are extensive discussions on its pathogenesis and treatment. Based on the theory of deficiency-excess pattern differentiation in the *Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon* and combined with clinical diagnostic and therapeutic experience, this article summarizes that the pathogenesis of functional constipation is closely related to the five zang organs and six fu organs. The treatment principle should follow 'draining excess and tonifying deficiency,' aiming to provide new insights for the treatment of functional constipation.

**Keywords:** Functional constipation, Traditional Chinese Medicine Treatment, Pattern identification.

## 1. Introduction

The concept of constipation can be traced back to the "Huangdi Neijing", where the term "constipation" is not explicitly mentioned, but descriptions such as "difficulty in defecation," "hard stool," and "difficulty in urination and defecation" are found [1]. In the "Lingshu-Ying Wei Shenghui" chapter, it is mentioned, "Thus, food and water are usually stored together in the stomach, transformed into waste, and then descend to the large intestine, forming the lower burner," indicating that the formation of feces primarily occurs in the intestines. According to the differentiation of deficiency and excess, diseases are categorized into deficiency and excess types. This article elaborates on the pathogenesis of constipation based on the holistic view of traditional Chinese medicine, as detailed below.

## 2. Etiology and Pathogenesis of Constipation

### 2.1 Chinese Medicine Etiology and Pathogenesis

In traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), constipation is primarily attributed to abnormal conduction in the large intestine, leading to stagnation of pathogens in the stomach and intestines and retention of waste. TCM refers to this condition as "difficulty in defecation" or "spleen constraint." Although the primary location of the disease is the large intestine, it is closely related to the functional disorders of the spleen, stomach, and liver. Dysfunctions such as impaired lung diffusion and descent, liver stagnation, and spleen transportation and transformation can all lead to abnormal conduction in the large intestine, resulting in constipation. The *Suwen-Jue Lun* mentions: "When the Taiyin channel is affected, there will be abdominal fullness and distension, and difficulty in defecation." Therefore, the onset of constipation is not only related to the large intestine but also closely associated with the five zang organs (heart, liver, spleen, lung, and kidney) and emotional changes. The main causes of

constipation include: 1) Exposure to external pathogens: Invasion of cold or heat pathogens can lead to stagnation in the stomach and intestines, affecting intestinal conduction and causing constipation. 2) Dietary damage: Consuming spicy or irritating foods, or taking medications that harm the spleen and stomach, can lead to heat accumulation in the stomach and intestines, depleting body fluids and causing intestinal dryness, making bowel movements difficult. 3) Emotional imbalance: Liver qi stagnation can lead to impaired qi movement, resulting in obstruction of intestinal qi and difficulty in defecation. 4) Chronic illness or physical weakness: Prolonged illness, severe disease, or aging can lead to deficiency of both qi and blood, as well as yin and yang, resulting in poor nourishment of the intestines, dryness, and difficulty in defecation.

"The large intestine is the organ responsible for conduction and transformation." Constipation is attributed to the imbalance of qi movement in the intestinal organs, leading to obstruction of intestinal qi and abnormal conduction in the large intestine. Normal bowel movements depend on the lung's function of descending qi, the liver's function of regulating qi, and the normal ascending and descending of spleen and stomach qi. Obstruction in the upper orifices inevitably leads to impaired qi movement in the lower orifices. Therefore, the treatment of constipation should focus on ensuring the smooth movement of qi in the zang-fu organs. Master TCM practitioner Xu Jingfan advocates treating constipation based on the theory of "qi," categorizing constipation into four types: lung qi stagnation, liver qi stagnation, spleen and stomach qi stagnation, and kidney qi transformation deficiency. These are treated with methods to promote lung qi, soothe the liver, strengthen the spleen and stomach, and warm the kidney and nourish essence, respectively.

Modern TCM practitioners such as Yu Jinyuan emphasize treating functional constipation from the perspective of the

liver, believing that liver qi stagnation is closely related to constipation. The liver regulates the movement of qi throughout the body and also influences emotional states and the digestive functions of the spleen and stomach. Smooth liver qi movement facilitates the spleen and stomach's ability to transport and transform nutrients, promoting the circulation of qi and blood throughout the body. Impaired liver qi movement can affect the ascending and descending functions of the spleen and stomach, as well as the circulation of body fluids, leading to poor digestion and absorption of food, and difficulty in expelling waste, thereby causing constipation.

## 2.2 Etiology and Pathogenesis in Modern Medicine

Constipation refers to having fewer than three bowel movements per week, with dry and hard stools that are difficult to pass, and may be accompanied by symptoms such as a feeling of fullness and abdominal pain. In severe cases, manual assistance may be required to facilitate defecation [4]. Constipation can be caused by organic diseases such as colorectal tumors, or by functional disorders such as irritable bowel syndrome. For organic constipation, surgical treatment is often used clinically, while functional constipation can be treated through various methods including oral medications, enemas, and dietary adjustments. Constipation can be caused by colonic and anal diseases, extraintestinal diseases, poor lifestyle habits, and psychosocial factors such as anxiety and depression. Its occurrence is related to gender, age, abnormalities in the anorectal ring and pelvic floor muscles, women's childbirth experiences, and poor defecation habits. Functional constipation, as a type of constipation not caused by organic changes, currently has an unclear pathogenesis. The entire defecation process requires the conduction of impulses by peripheral nerve excitation, leading to a series of coordinated muscle contractions to complete the process. Any disruption in this process can lead to constipation.

## 3. Traditional Chinese Medicine Characteristic Treatment

### 3.1 Pattern Identification

#### 3.1.1 Chinese herbal decoction

In the context of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), the differentiation and treatment of constipation generally begin with distinguishing whether it is a deficiency type or an excess type, and then further categorizing it as a cold syndrome or a heat syndrome to apply the corresponding treatment. The TCM approach to treating constipation primarily involves the use of herbal decoctions. For excess types: Cold accumulation constipation is treated with modified Dahuang Fuzi Decoction; Heat constipation is treated with modified Maziren Pill; Qi constipation is treated with modified Liu Mo Decoction. For deficiency types: Qi deficiency constipation is treated with modified Huangqi Decoction; Blood deficiency constipation is treated with modified Runchang Pill; Yin deficiency constipation is treated with modified Zengye Decoction; Yang deficiency constipation is treated with modified Jichuan Decoction. The treatment is often based on the physician's clinical experience, and there is currently no unified standard for evaluating efficacy. For instance, Duan Qi et al. [6] used the Sanren Decoction based on the triple energizer pattern

identification to treat damp-heat stagnation type constipation, achieving a cure rate of 77.14% and a total effective rate of 97.1% in a clinical study of 35 cases. Professor Xin Zhike emphasizes treating the root cause of the disease, believing that chronic illness often leads to deficiency, and advocates treating functional constipation from a deficiency perspective, achieving good results [7]. Lin Liubing et al. [8] consider constipation as a condition of root deficiency and branch excess. They divided 160 patients with functional constipation into a test group and a control group. The test group was treated with TCM differentiation into four types, each treated with corresponding herbal decoctions combined with TCM-specific therapies: Middle Qi deficiency was treated with modified Buzhong Yiqi Decoction; Spleen and kidney Yang deficiency was treated with modified Jichuan Decoction; Intestinal dryness due to fluid deficiency was treated with modified Zengye Decoction combined with Runchang Pill; Qi and Yin deficiency was treated with Qilang Mixture. The control group was treated with lactulose. The results showed that the test group had significantly better stool consistency and defecation frequency than the control group. He Fenghua et al. [9] achieved good clinical efficacy in treating elderly patients with Qi deficiency type functional constipation using modified Huangqi Decoction.

#### 3.1.2 Chinese Patent Medicine

Constipation can also be treated with oral Chinese patent medicines. The advantages of using Chinese patent medicines for treating constipation include their ease of preparation, portability, minimal side effects, and low cost, which can reduce the treatment burden on patients. Representative formulas include Shouhui Tongbian Capsules and Danggui Longhui Pills. Using Chinese patent medicines to treat functional constipation can address both the symptoms and root causes, moisten the intestines, and promote bowel movements, effectively alleviating constipation and improving patients' quality of life. Xu Chen [10] et al. reported a total effective rate of 93.33% in treating elderly patients with functional constipation using Shouhui Tongbian Capsules.

#### 3.1.3 Pills

The advantages of oral pills in treating constipation lie in their ease of storage and administration, as well as their ability to provide sustained therapeutic effects within the body, reduce toxicity, and cause fewer side effects. Commonly selected medications include Maren Pills, Baohe Pills, and Buzhong Yiqi Pills. Yang Bo et al. [11] used Liuwei Dihuang Pills to treat 30 cases of elderly patients with functional constipation. The treatment group was administered Liuwei Dihuang Pills orally, while the control group received Maren Pills. The results showed significant improvements in stool consistency and frequency of bowel movements in the treatment group. The total effective rate of the treatment group using Liuwei Dihuang Pills was 86.7%, indicating a favorable therapeutic outcome.

## 3.2 Acupuncture and Tuina Therapy

Acupuncture therapy for constipation involves the insertion of needles into specific acupoints to promote gastrointestinal

motility, regulate gastrointestinal secretion, and improve digestion and absorption. Acupuncture can address intestinal dysfunction and alleviate constipation symptoms. Clinically, common methods include thunder-fire moxibustion and warm needle acupuncture. The advantages of acupuncture therapy for constipation include faster onset of action compared to oral medications, no risk of drug dependence, minimal side effects, simple operation, and low cost, making it widely used in clinical practice. Wu Xiuyi et al. [12] treated 120 patients with functional constipation using acupuncture, selecting acupoints based on clinical diagnosis and applying routine filiform needle acupuncture. The control group was treated with oral polyethylene glycol electrolyte powder and Hemp Seed Pills. The results showed that the acupuncture group experienced significant relief from constipation symptoms, reduced abdominal distension and pain, with a total effective rate of 96.7%. Ren Yadong [13] used warm needle acupuncture to treat 41 cases of chronic functional constipation. The total effective rate in the warm needle acupuncture group was 85.37%, compared to 68.29% in the simple acupuncture group, indicating that warm needle acupuncture is more effective than simple acupuncture for chronic functional constipation.

Acupoint Injection Therapy involves injecting medication into specific acupoints based on the properties of the drug and the functions of the acupoints. For constipation, the acupoints commonly selected for injection are Zusanli and Dachangshu. Zusanli belongs to the Stomach Meridian of Foot-Yangming and is the lower He-Sea point of the stomach, making it a primary acupoint for gastrointestinal disorders. Acupoint injection therapy for constipation can regulate gastrointestinal function, promote intestinal peristalsis, increase gastrin secretion, and alleviate constipation symptoms. Zhen Songping et al. [14] divided 24 patients with post-stroke constipation into a treatment group and a control group. The treatment group received Zusanli acupoint injection of metoclopramide, while the control group received only routine care. The results showed that Zusanli acupoint injection of metoclopramide was significantly effective in treating constipation.

Auricular acupressure involves stimulating specific ear points using seeds to regulate bodily functions and treat diseases. By applying Wangbuliuxing seeds (*Semen Vaccariae*) to ear acupoints, it can help unblock meridians and prevent or treat constipation. Liu Suying et al. [15] treated 80 patients with functional constipation using auricular acupressure with Wangbuliuxing seeds, achieving a cure rate of 95%.

Abdominal Tuina refers to the stimulation of abdominal meridians through manual massage techniques, promoting the circulation of Qi and blood, regulating the functions of internal organs, and enhancing intestinal peristalsis, thereby facilitating bowel movements. Chen Yongfeng [16] used abdominal Tuina to treat 30 cases of functional constipation in the elderly, with a total effective rate of 93.33%. Wang Min [17] et al. applied abdominal Tuina to treat 60 cases of functional constipation in the elderly, achieving a total effective rate of 93.33%.

### 3.3 Catgut Embedding Therapy

Catgut Embedding Therapy involves the implantation of catgut threads into specific acupoints in the human body. The stimulation of these acupoints and meridians by the threads helps to balance Qi and blood, regulate visceral functions, and treat various conditions. This method is known for its rapid onset, long-lasting effects, and minimal patient discomfort. In the treatment of functional constipation, it promotes gastrointestinal motility and provides sustained relief from constipation symptoms, demonstrating significant efficacy. Fang Qingxia et al. [18] divided 144 patients with functional constipation into two groups: an embedding group and an acupuncture group, each with 72 patients. The acupuncture group received treatment at primary acupoints such as Tianshu, Zhigou, Shuidao, Guilai, and Fenglong, supplemented by secondary acupoints like Juxu, Qihai, and Pishu. The embedding group received treatment at primary acupoints such as Shenshu, Tianshu, and Dachangshu, supplemented by secondary acupoints like Hegu, Neiting, Taichong, and Zhongwan. The results showed that the total effective rate was 94.44% in the embedding group and 80.56% in the acupuncture group, indicating that catgut embedding therapy is more effective for functional constipation. Wang Yuzhong [19] treated 28 cases of slow-transit constipation with catgut embedding therapy, achieving an effective rate of 92.8% after the first treatment and 100% after the second treatment.

### 3.4 Acupoint Application Therapy

Acupoint Application Therapy refers to a method of applying medicinal substances to specific acupoints on the skin to achieve therapeutic effects through transdermal absorption. This therapy can unblock meridians, balance Qi and blood, regulate Yin and Yang, and harmonize the physiological functions of the internal organs, thereby treating diseases. Unlike oral medications, acupoint application bypasses the digestive system, reducing the first-pass effect of drugs, improving their utilization, and offering advantages such as simplicity in preparation, portability, ease of use, and fewer adverse reactions. In the treatment of functional constipation, the Shenque acupoint is most commonly selected for acupoint application, often combined with Tianshu and Dachangshu to regulate the flow of Qi and blood throughout the body, promoting intestinal motility and relieving constipation. The Guanyuan acupoint, belonging to the Conception Vessel (Ren Mai) and serving as the front-mu point of the small intestine, is also frequently used in acupoint application to enhance gastrointestinal motility and facilitate bowel movements. In a study by Li Yanhui et al. [20], 42 patients were divided into a treatment group and a control group. The treatment group received acupoint application with herbs such as Sanleng, Ezhu, Dahuang, and Bingpian at the Guanyuan, Tianshu, and Qihai acupoints, while the control group was given Congrong Tongbian Oral Liquid. The results showed that the treatment group experienced bowel movements more quickly, with significant symptom improvement. In another study by Wang Wenwen et al. [21], 100 patients with functional constipation were treated with acupoint application, achieving a total effective rate of 74%. Jiang Pengpai et al. [22] reported a 90% effectiveness rate using Daozhi Tongbian Paste for functional constipation.

### 3.5 Herbal Enema Therapy

Herbal enema refers to a method of directly administering medication through the rectum, bypassing the digestive tract, allowing absorption via the inferior vena cava and other pathways. This external treatment method involves decocting oral herbal formulas, removing the residue, and slowly injecting or dripping the liquid into the rectum. The solution is retained for several minutes before being expelled, enabling the colonic mucosa to absorb the medicinal components, thereby alleviating constipation. Herbal enema therapy acts quickly and is particularly effective for patients who do not respond well to oral medications, providing rapid relief and significant results. Liao Huiping et al. [23] treated 198 constipation patients with Maren Pill combined with herbal enema, achieving a total effective rate of 88.3%, demonstrating the efficacy of this method. Lin Hui et al. [24] used herbal enema to treat 36 cases of chronic constipation, with a cure rate of 71.1%. Liu Jing [25] applied herbal retention enema to treat constipation in elderly patients, achieving a total effective rate of 92%.

### 3.6 Other Therapies

In addition to traditional Chinese medicine treatments, general management should include adopting healthy lifestyle and dietary habits. Patients with constipation

Should engage in regular physical exercise, such as practicing Baduanjin, Wuqinxi, Taiji, or Daoyin to enhance physical fitness, regulate daily routines, and maintain a balance between work and rest. Additionally, attention should be paid to dietary habits. Consuming more vegetables and fruits rich in dietary fiber can promote bowel movements and prevent constipation. It is also important to establish a regular bowel routine, drink plenty of water, and replenish fluids and electrolytes after exercise to prevent imbalances. Patients should maintain a positive mental state, avoiding anxiety or depression, as these emotions may negatively affect intestinal function and lead to constipation.

## 4. Summary

Constipation is a common clinical condition. Although it has a low mortality rate, it is often a chronic process with a prolonged course and is prone to recurrence and persistent difficulty in resolution. It is caused by various pathological factors and not only refers to dry stool but also includes difficulty in defecation or accompanying symptoms such as anal distension and a sensation of incomplete evacuation after defecation. With changes in social life and dietary habits, the number of people suffering from constipation has been increasing annually, showing a trend of affecting younger individuals. The causes of constipation are diverse, and a comprehensive judgment should be made based on the patient's clinical manifestations and auxiliary examinations to determine the type of constipation and provide appropriate treatment.

In Western medicine, the primary treatment for functional constipation is the use of laxatives. However, long-term use of laxatives can easily lead to intestinal disorders or disturbances in water-electrolyte balance, and the efficacy is not long-lasting, often causing certain side effects. Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) emphasizes treating both the

symptoms and the root cause of constipation. For acute constipation, symptomatic treatment is adopted, and if necessary, purgatives such as Dahuang and Gansui are used to relieve symptoms and reduce patient discomfort. For chronic constipation, TCM focuses on addressing the root cause, differentiating between patterns such as damp-heat stagnation leading to constipation or yin deficiency and fluid depletion causing intestinal malnourishment, and providing corresponding treatments accordingly. TCM treatment for constipation offers advantages such as addressing both symptoms and root causes, minimal patient discomfort, low treatment costs, and fewer side effects, making it widely applied in clinical practice. In summary, for patients with functional constipation, TCM treatment is a safe, effective, and relatively gentle therapeutic approach.

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