

Brief Discussion on Characteristic TCM Therapies for Constipation in the Elderly

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Abstract: Constipation, one of the most common health issues in modern society, has a high prevalence rate, particularly among elderly patients. Although not life-threatening on its own, it significantly impacts quality of life. Clinically, most constipation patients also suffer from other underlying conditions, leading to severely compromised well-being. Therefore, finding effective treatments is crucial for these individuals. Various therapeutic approaches exist for constipation in clinical practice. This article focuses on the characteristic methods of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) and their efficacy in treatment

Keywords: Constipation, Traditional Chinese Medicine, Acupoint.

1. Introduction

Constipation is a disorder characterized by abnormal bowel movement, where stool remains excessively prolonged in the intestines, leading to hardened feces, difficulty in defecation, and irregular bowel cycles. In some cases, the stool may not be dry but still difficult to pass, or there may be an urge to defecate without complete evacuation [1]. Modern medical treatments for constipation often focus on symptomatic relief rather than addressing the root cause, resulting in frequent recurrence and failure to fundamentally alleviate patients' suffering. In contrast, Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) therapies—such as acupuncture, tuina (Chinese therapeutic massage), and herbal decoctions—have demonstrated significant clinical efficacy. This article explores TCM-specific treatments for constipation in the elderly, aiming to identify optimal therapeutic approaches and ultimately relieve patients' distress.

2. The Origin and Evolution of the Terminology “Constipation” (Biàn Mì) in Traditional Chinese Medicine

In Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), the disease name “constipation” was first recorded in the Huangdi Neijing (The Inner Canon of Yellow Emperor). It holds that constipation is related to the spleen and stomach, kidneys, and small intestine. The Su Wen·Jue Lun (Plain Questions·On Fainting) mentions that Jue Zheng (fainting/syncope, here referring to a type of pathological state with abdominal distension as a symptom) caused by disorders in the Taiyin meridian will lead to abdominal distension and difficult defecation. The Su Wen·Ju Tong Lun (Plain Questions·On Pain) states that if pathogenic heat accumulates in the small intestine, it can cause intestinal pain. Due to internal heat consuming body fluids, resulting in dry lips, thirst, and hard, difficult-to-pass stools, abdominal pain and constipation will occur [2]. During the Eastern Han Dynasty, Zhang Zhongjing proposed different terms such as “pi constraint” referring to a condition where the spleen's function in transporting fluids is restricted), “depletion of body fluids”, “yin constipation”, and “yang constipation” [3]. In the Sui and Tang Dynasties, Chao Yuanfang stated in his Treatise on the Causes and Symptoms of Diseases (Zhu Bing

Yuan Hou Lun): “Difficulty in defecation results from the disharmony of the five zang-organs, with an imbalance of yin and yang leading to either deficiency or excess. It is also due to the disharmony of the sanjiao (triple burner), causing the concurrent presence of cold and heat” [4]. And at that time, people began to refer to constipation as “dabian bu tong”. During the Jin and Yuan Dynasties, Li Dongyuan put forward the view in Lan Shi Mi Cang that “obstruction in the transportation and transformation of body fluids will lead to dry stools and difficulty in defecation.” He also classified it into five types: dryness caused by heat, wind, yang deficiency, yin deficiency, and qi deficiency in the elderly [5]. Zhu Danxi, in Danxi Xinfu (Heart Method of Danxi), held the view that constipation was caused by a deficiency of blood, or wind invading the stomach and intestines, resulting in dryness and obstructed defecation. He classified constipation into seven types: deficiency constipation, wind constipation, dampness constipation, fire constipation, constipation due to insufficient body fluids, cold constipation, and qi constipation. Shen Jin'ao of the Qing Dynasty emphasized in Za Bing Yuan Liu Xi Zhu (Essentials of the Origins and Manifestations of Various Diseases) that “constipation is a disease related to the kidneys” [6], explicitly proposing the disease name of constipation. Since then, the term “constipation” has been in continuous use.

3. Etiology and Pathogenesis

3.1 The Understanding of Ancient Traditional Chinese Medicine Practitioners on the Etiology and Pathogenesis of Constipation

Medical practitioners across different dynasties have held diverse views and understandings regarding the etiology and pathogenesis of constipation, with varying emphases among different schools of thought. Constipation is a chronic disease characterized by a long course and a tendency to recurrent episodes. Its fundamental pathogenesis lies in the disturbance of the large intestine's conveyance and discharge functions, which is caused by qi stagnation, cold accumulation, heat coagulation, or deficiencies in qi, blood, yin, and yang. The primary site of onset is the large intestine, but it is also associated with the lungs, spleen and stomach, liver, and kidneys [7]. Jingyue Quanshu holds that yang constipation is

invariably caused by an excessive prevalence of pathogenic fire, which leads to the dryness and depletion of body fluids. It points out that constipation is often induced by a pre-existing constitution of excessive yang [8]. Jingui Yi states: "In cold constipation, cold qi obstructs the intestines and stomach, consolidates yin and binds it tightly, impedes the flow of yang qi, and obstructs the circulation of body fluids [9]." It indicates that constipation can be triggered by the invasion of external pathogenic factors. Yizong Bidu states: "Moreover in the elderly, when body fluids are dried up; in women after childbirth who have suffered from blood loss, as well as those who have undergone sweating and diuresis therapies; and in patients whose qi and blood have not yet recovered after illness, all these conditions can lead to constipation." It points out that individuals with a weak constitution, or those who are in a post-illness, postpartum state, or are elderly and frail, are prone to developing constipation [10]. The Zhengzhi Huibu from the Qing Dynasty states: "The kidneys govern the five bodily fluids. Thus, when the kidneys are in a state of excess, there is an abundance of bodily fluids, resulting in smooth bowel movements. When the kidneys are deficient, bodily fluids are depleted, leading to constipation... All these conditions are ultimately caused by blood deficiency. Generally, dryness is attributed to the kidneys, and constipation to the spleen. A clear distinction must be made." It holds that a deficiency of qi and blood is the primary cause of constipation [11].

3.2 The Modern Medical Understanding of the Etiology and Pathogenesis of Constipation

After centuries of development, modern medicine has gained a more profound understanding of the etiology and pathogenesis of constipation. Modern medicine posits that defecation is an extremely complex process. After feces pass through the intestines and reach the rectum, a sensation of the need to defecate is generated. This sensation is then reflexively transmitted to the brain. Subsequently, the brain sends out commands to relax the rectum and sphincter muscles. Once the feces have passed, the sphincter muscles contract again, restoring normalcy. If any issues arise during this process, constipation can occur.

Elderly functional constipation is a chronic functional digestive system disorder without organic lesions. Its main clinical manifestations include difficulty in passing stools, prolonged defecation intervals, dry and hard stools, a sensation of incomplete evacuation, a feeling of blockage in the anus during defecation, and even the need for manual assistance in defecation. Constipation can be caused by multiple factors. Dietary imbalances, colonic and anal diseases, social and psychological factors, genetic factors, as well as unhealthy lifestyle habits such as prolonged sitting and lack of exercise, can all contribute to the onset of constipation.

4. Treatment of Constipation

4.1 The Following are the Western Medical Treatment Methods for Constipation.

Different treatment approaches should be selected based on the various types of constipation. For organic constipation, the first step is to identify the underlying cause. When necessary,

medications such as glycerin suppositories (like Kai Sai Lu, a common brand name for glycerin enema in Chinese context, here translated generally) can be used to relieve constipation symptoms and alleviate patient discomfort.

For functional constipation, patient education is the initial priority. Patients should be advised to consume fewer spicy and irritating foods, increase dietary fiber intake, drink plenty of water, develop a regular bowel habit, and avoid the indiscriminate use of laxatives. For patients whose constipation worsens due to stress reactions or emotional disorders, psychological intervention therapy may be provided when necessary to help them build confidence in treatment and enhance their treatment compliance. Subsequently, pharmacological treatments can be administered, including the use of prokinetic agents, laxatives, and saline enemas.

In addition, modern medicine offers other treatment options for constipation, such as biofeedback therapy and cleansing enemas, which have demonstrated favorable therapeutic effects for certain types of constipation. For patients with constipation caused by outlet obstruction, surgical intervention may be considered when conservative treatments prove ineffective.

4.2 Traditional Chinese Medicine Characteristic Therapies for Constipation

Generally speaking, traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) therapies for constipation include external treatment methods and internal treatment methods. External treatment methods encompass acupoint application, tuina (Chinese massage), and acupuncture therapy, all of which are based on the theory of meridians and acupoints. Acupoints are special regions on the body's surface where the qi and blood of the zang-fu organs and meridians are transported and infused. Techniques like acupoint application, tuina, and acupuncture aim to stimulate acupoints, thereby achieving therapeutic effects. Internal treatment methods, on the other hand, require the selection of different herbal formulas through syndrome differentiation and treatment to cure the disease.

4.2.1 Acupoint application

Acupoint application is a non-invasive and painless therapy. Given its characteristics of simple treatment methods and low cost, patients have a relatively high level of recognition and acceptance of it. The therapeutic mechanism involves grinding traditional Chinese herbs into a powder, mixing it with an appropriate amount of solvent, and then blending the two in a certain proportion before applying the mixture to specific acupoints. The medicinal power can stimulate the meridians through the acupoints and reach the qi of the zang-fu organs, thereby achieving therapeutic effects. Common acupoints used for acupoint application in patients with constipation include Shenque (CV8), Zusanli, and Dachangshu, all of which can be employed in the treatment of constipation. Shenque is a crucial acupoint for nourishing the primordial qi and consolidating the foundation, as well as regulating the spleen and stomach. When used in combination with Zusanli and Dachangshu, it can regulate the qi movement of the spleen and stomach. Once the qi movement is smooth,

the large intestine's conducting function is restored, and bowel movements become natural and smooth.

This therapy is simple and easy to perform, with remarkable therapeutic effects. Patients rarely experience adverse reactions, making it widely applicable in clinical practice.

4.2.2 Tuina Therapy

Tuina therapy is also a widely applied treatment method. Its principle lies in using special manipulation techniques on the meridians, acupoints, and certain parts of the human body to dredge the meridians, lubricate the joints, promote the circulation of qi and blood, and adjust the functions of the zang-fu organs, thereby achieving the goal of health maintenance and disease treatment.

In clinical practice, doctors often advise patients with constipation to massage their abdomen in a clockwise direction to alleviate constipation symptoms. This is also the simplest form of tuina manipulation. By massaging the acupoints on the abdomen, it can enhance gastrointestinal motility, promote intestinal peristalsis, and facilitate the excretion of intestinal contents [12]. This therapy is simple and easy to perform, with remarkable therapeutic effects and a high level of patient acceptance. Thus, it can be widely promoted and used in clinical settings.

4.2.3 Acupuncture Therapy

Acupuncture therapy has also proven to be a relatively effective treatment method in recent years, with significant therapeutic effects on constipation. For patients with constipation, the primary acupoints selected are generally those on the Foot Yangming Meridian and Hand Shaoyang Meridian, or the Back-Shu points, Front-Mu points, and Lower He-Sea points of the large intestine.

Tianshu is the Front-Mu point of the large intestine. When used together with Dachangshu it follows the Front-Mu and Back-Shu point combination method. Shangjuxu is the Lower He-Sea point of the large intestine. The combined use of these three acupoints can dredge and regulate the zang-fu organs of the large intestine. Once the zang-fu organs are unobstructed, the conducting function of the large intestine will be restored, thereby alleviating constipation symptoms. Zhigou is an acupoint on the Triple Energizer Meridian, which can dredge the qi movement of the Triple Energizer and regulate the intestines. Zhaohai is an acupoint on the Kidney Meridian, which can moisten the intestines. The combined use of these two acupoints is an empirically effective pair for treating constipation. Zusanli is the He-Sea point of the Stomach Meridian, which can regulate the stomach and intestines, dredge the qi of the Yangming fu-organs, and facilitate defecation.

During acupuncture, it is important to avoid important internal organs and tissue structures. Before acupuncture, pay attention to observing the patient's condition. Patients with a weak constitution are not suitable for acupuncture. In recent years, acupuncture therapy has become widely popular internationally. With its remarkable therapeutic effects and high patient acceptance, it has a promising development

prospect.

4.2.4 Acupoint Catgut Embedding Therapy

Acupoint catgut embedding is a special type of acupoint stimulation therapy. It is a treatment method formed by combining meridian theory with modern medicine based on the principles of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM).

Under the guidance of TCM theory, absorbable sutures are embedded into specific acupoints. The continuous and effective stimulation of these acupoints by the absorbable sutures can regulate the body's endocrine system and stimulate gastrointestinal motility, thereby achieving a laxative effect [13].

Compared with other therapies, acupoint catgut embedding therapy offers advantages such as long-lasting therapeutic effects and relatively mild stimulation. By using this therapy, adverse stimulation reactions caused by long-term acupuncture on local areas can be avoided. It also reduces the number of patient visits, making it more suitable for individuals with mobility issues. Moreover, this therapy demonstrates high clinical safety and has a good therapeutic effect on chronic constipation.

4.2.5 Gua Sha Therapy

Gua Sha therapy is also a distinctive traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) treatment for constipation. According to TCM principles, Gua Sha utilizes specialized tools to act on the human body through the skin, stimulating meridians and promoting the smooth flow of qi and blood.

Before performing Gua Sha, the targeted area should be thoroughly cleaned, and an appropriate medium (such as massage oil) should be applied. Using a Gua Sha tool, scrape the skin in a downward and outward motion, starting with light pressure and gradually increasing it while maintaining even strokes. Continue scraping until purplish-red spots (known as "Sha marks") appear. During the process, care must be taken to avoid damaging the patient's skin. By stimulating meridian transmission through Gua Sha, blood circulation can be accelerated, and metabolism enhanced, thereby promoting gastrointestinal motility and alleviating constipation symptoms [14]. It is important to note that Gua Sha therapy is not suitable for critically ill patients or those with skin lesions.

Gua Sha therapy has demonstrated significant efficacy in treating constipation. However, its clinical application for this purpose remains relatively rare. Therefore, further promotion of Gua Sha therapy in clinical practice is warranted in the future.

4.2.6 Warm Needling Therapy

Warm needling therapy is a traditional Chinese medical (TCM) treatment modality with a history spanning over 2,000 years, tracing its origins to Zhang Zhongjing's Treatise on Cold Damage Disorders (Shang Han Lun) from the Han Dynasty. This therapy is predominantly employed to treat geriatric constipation, a condition primarily attributed to

physical frailty and deficiencies in qi (vital energy) and blood. Specifically, qi deficiency manifests as fatigue during defecation, while insufficient blood circulation leads to dry stools and difficulty in passing them.

Clinically, the application of warm needling therapy for elderly constipation achieves the effects of dredging meridians and nourishing qi-blood. By harmonizing qi and blood, it regulates the ascending and descending functions of qi throughout the body, ensuring smooth intestinal motility (fu qi). Consequently, this approach effectively alleviates constipation symptoms.

4.2.7 Herbal Formula Therapy

Treatment of constipation requires restoring the large intestine's conduction function, primarily through purgative methods. However, constipation patients often present with additional symptoms, necessitating specific herbal combinations rather than relying solely on purgative drugs to achieve optimal efficacy. TCM differentiates constipation into excess and deficiency syndromes. For excess syndromes, the focus is on eliminating pathogenic factors through heat-clearing, warming-promoting, and qi-regulating methods, supplemented by liver-soothing herbs. For deficiency syndromes, the priority is to strengthen the body's vital energy (qi) and blood, primarily using yin-nourishing, blood-replenishing, qi-tonifying, and yang-warming approaches, combined with mildly warming and laxative herbs. In cases of mixed excess-deficiency syndromes, a combined strategy of purgation and tonification should be employed.

Clinically, modified Da Cheng Qi Tang is commonly used for yangming-channel heat-accumulation constipation, with rhubarb (Dahuang) as the sovereign herb for heat-purgating and stool-softening, supported by magnolia bark (Houpu) and immature bitter orange (Zhishi) to accelerate the descent of stagnation. Modified Wen Pi Tang (Warming the Spleen Decoction) typically treats yang-deficiency cold-accumulation constipation, using aconite (Fuzi) and rhubarb as sovereign herbs, supplemented by ginseng (Renshen) and angelica (Danggui) to combine tonification with purgation. Ma Zi Ren Wan (Hemp Seed Pill) is frequently prescribed for spleen-constraint constipation (characterized by dry stools and frequent urination), featuring fire hemp seed (Huomaren) as the sovereign herb, combined with peony root (Shaoyao), rhubarb, magnolia bark, and honey to balance purgation with moistening without damaging vital energy. Ji Chuan Jian (River-Restoring Decoction) serves as the primary formula for kidney-deficiency constipation, uniquely free of purgative herbs. It uses desertliving cistanche (Roucongrong) as the sovereign herb to warm the kidneys and replenish essence, supported by black cohosh (Shengma), cyathula root (Niuxi), angelica, and alisma (Zexie), embodying the principle of "descending by first ascending" to warm the kidneys, nourish the liver, and replenish both essence and blood, prioritizing root treatment.

The above represent classic TCM formulas for constipation, though many other effective prescriptions exist. Herbal treatment requires patience, as it demands precise syndrome differentiation and adherence to at least one full course

(typically several weeks) to observe clinical benefits. With recent advancements in TCM development, herbal medicines and proprietary Chinese remedies have gained widespread clinical adoption, demonstrating significant efficacy and earning high patient satisfaction.

5. Summary

Constipation is a clinically prevalent chronic disease with multiple etiologies, necessitating tailored therapeutic approaches. Patients should initially adopt healthy lifestyle modifications, including minimizing spicy/irritating foods, increasing dietary fiber intake and hydration, avoiding prolonged sitting and excessive toilet time, and establishing regular bowel habits. If symptoms persist, pharmacological intervention is warranted [15].

Western medical treatments (e. g., laxatives, enemas) often provide symptomatic relief without addressing root causes, leading to high recurrence rates. Patient acceptance of enema therapy remains low, highlighting the superiority of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) in constipation management. External TCM therapies such as acupoint application, tuina massage, and acupuncture have gained widespread clinical adoption in recent years, demonstrating significant efficacy and high patient satisfaction. Herbal remedies, the most commonly utilized TCM modality, are frequently self-administered by patients (e. g., senna leaf infusions, honey water), reflecting broad public acceptance. The spectrum of TCM-specific constipation therapies extends far beyond those mentioned. As a national treasure, TCM harbors immense untapped potential. Future research should focus on uncovering and clinically validating more effective therapies to benefit patients worldwide.

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