



Traditional Chinese Medicine approach to breastfeeding

Lorne Brown

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) is an ancient, professional health discipline designed to promote wellness and cure illness, with the emphasis on prevention. TCM believes that the proper development of an infant's digestion plays a pivotal role in ensuring future health and well-being, and this begins with breastfeeding.

Chinese medicine advocates breastmilk over any other food source for infants, comparable to the progressive, Western view of medicine. These views differ, however, in addressing the timing of feeds.

TCM understanding of digestion

Also referred to as Eastern or Oriental Medicine, TCM is a complete healthcare system with its own model and understanding of the human being, which is unrelated to and quite different from the Western model of medicine.

According to Chinese medicine, children are physically and functionally immature, not simply miniature adults. A child's digestive function is not fortified and complete and, therefore, can be easily damaged by food¹.

The main organ systems involved in digestion, according to TCM, are the spleen and the stomach. So as not to confuse them with the spleen and stomach of Western biology, they will be referred to as TCM-spleen and TCM-stomach. Understanding the role of the TCM-spleen is essential to understand digestion; however, some basic principles of TCM must be briefly explained first.

Qi (pronounced "chee") is the force involved in all bodily functions, including metabolism. Blood moistens and nourishes, suffusing all the tissues of the body. The body creates Qi and blood out of the finest essence of food and drink, through a process that is described as the separation of the "pure" and the "turbid," or impure. The turbid is eliminated from the body, while the pure is further transformed into Qi and blood.

The separation of the pure from the turbid is dependent on the TCM-spleen's ability to transform and transport, which is part of the TCM view of digestion. When there is a deficiency in Qi and blood, then there is insufficient fuel to function, nourish, build, and repair the body. This leads to imbalances that contribute to ill health, and the cycle of poor health begins.

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Food stagnation in infants

In infants, a baby's immature digestive system has difficulty separating the pure from the impure, which leads to food stagnation. Food stagnation, a common TCM pattern imbalance in infants, is the cause of most pediatric complaints, such as colic, diarrhea, vomiting of milk, earaches, and upper respiratory illnesses¹. The imbalance is the result of over feeding, which inundates the TCM-spleen with more food than it can efficiently deal with, which leads to the accumulation of the turbid and, ultimately, digestive upset.

Certain symptoms and signs are usually observed before one of these pediatric complaints manifests. A TCM practitioner will pay particular attention for signs of nasal mucous, loose stools, the smell of the baby's breath, and will examine the vein at the base of the index finger to help determine causes of dampness or weakness of the TCM-spleen. To correct the imbalance, the practitioner might advise that the breastfeeding schedule be implemented.

Interestingly, earache is a common ailment among North American infants, while in China, this ailment is not as significant. One speculated reason is that Chinese toddlers have less food stagnation due to their simpler

diet, which benefits, rather than impairs, digestion².

Early childhood digestion

Regulating and strengthening an infant's digestion is one of TCM's first steps in treating pediatric illness. Chinese medicine promotes breastfeeding on a schedule, rather than on demand.

Although breastmilk is the best source of nutrition for the infant, too much of a good thing can become unhealthy. Unregulated feeding can overburden the baby's digestive system and cause food stagnation. When left untreated, according to Chinese medicine, this food stagnation can lead to indigestion, earaches, vomiting, and colds.

If the baby has developed food stagnation because the digestive system has been overburdened by too much food, then the extra burden must be removed. One method is to schedule breastfeeds, which gives the digestive system an opportunity to catch up. This supports Chinese medicine's supposition that infant

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Traditional Chinese Medicine and breastfeeding (cont'd)

digestive systems are inherently weak and immature, and that attention to regulating and improving digestion will be central to reversing disease patterns and creating optimum health.

Beyond breastfeeding

Providing a child with a healthy, nutrient-rich diet is, of course, essential to prevent and treat even the most commonly encountered pediatric diseases. Chinese medical literature provides information on when to introduce solid foods, what foods to introduce, and how to introduce them to strengthen digestion and promote health.

Fortunately, the most common pediatric diseases are self-limiting because the TCM-spleen and TCM-stomach systems mature around the age of six¹. Generally, infants recover from illness quickly and easily; their bodies do not have an accumulation of waste and their organs have not lived a life of "insult and injury."

In summary, although the breastfed baby usually has fewer health problems than the formula-fed baby, TCM suggests

that if concerns arise, the breastfeeding schedule should be addressed.

References:

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Lorne Brown, BSc, DTCM, RTCMP is a registered practitioner of Traditional Chinese Medicine and acupuncture, in private practice in Vancouver. He has a special interest in treating infertility and providing prenatal and postpartum care. He can be reached through his website at www.acubalance.ca.