

Feature

Understanding Chinese Medicine — What exactly is “heaty” (熱氣) ?

Ms Chong Shui Ning, Registered Chinese Medicine Practitioner, United Christian Nethersole Community Health Service.

It may be a typical scene in your daily practice: an old lady comes into your consultation room, complains that she's having a sore throat, and keeps on telling you about her ailments in one breath before you can do any examination. Her final comment goes like this: “I think I am very heaty, there is a lot of heat inside me”.

It seems that Chinese people do have some common consensus about “heat”. Chinese people describe themselves as “heaty” whenever they have acne, bitter taste, canker sores, bad breath, sore throat, yellow urine, or constipation. Kwong Wah Hospital Paediatrics Department has done an interesting study* about “being heaty”. Among thousands of parents interviewed, 85% would describe their children as “heaty” or “hot” when they get increased eye secretion, sore throat, bad breath, constipation, or they become moody. The study also found that most of the parents would try using various methods to eliminate their children's “heat”; for instance, telling them to or making them drink more water and soup, eat fruits, and drink Chinese cooling-herbal-tea (涼茶) made from “five-flower” (五花) and “Spica Prunellae” (夏枯草).

In Chinese Medicine, the “heat” phenomenon is classified as/differentiated into “excess heat” (實熱; also called sthenic heat-syndrome) and “empty heat” (虛熱; also called asthenic heat-syndrome). It is best to explain “excess heat” and “empty heat” using the Yin-Yang theory. Yin-Yang is a concept. Anything in the universe can be described as Yin or Yang, such as:

Yin	Female	Moon	Darkness	Rest
Yang	Male	Sun	Light	Activity

By applying the Yin-Yang concept to Chinese Medicine, clinical signs and symptoms can be generally distinguished into Yin and Yang:

Yin	Hypo-activity	Cold limbs and body	Clear secretions	Pale tongue
Yang	Hyperactivity	Hot limbs and body	Sticky, yellow secretions	Red tongue

However, this differentiation is inadequate for us to get an exact diagnosis in practice. In a “hot” or heaty patient (i.e. Yang in excess), the next step is to further distinguish the nature of the “heat”. The following diagram can help us to understand the two “hot” bodily conditions.

Signs and symptoms surface once any imbalances of Yin-Yang occur in our body. “Heat” comes out when Yang is in excess, and the two types are “excess heat” caused by an absolute rise in Yang, and “empty heat” is generated by decreased Yin, i.e. Yang relatively increased. Examples of their signs and symptoms are:

