Pathogenesis of Liver Qi Stagnation

By E Douglas Kihn, OMD, LAc

Liver qi stagnation is the result of thoughts that are stuck in the past or future and are unable or unwilling to move forward in tune with the present moment. “Worrying,” “anxiety,” and “neurosis” are general terms most often used to describe the condition of liver qi stagnation.

Our Chinese liver (*gan*) is like a manager or director, ever responsible for the free flow of qi and the harmonious functioning of all other organs and tissues in the human body. “Qi” is that very yang substance which animates all yin in the universe, which includes our own blood, fluids, food, organs, muscles, and feelings.

A disturbed *shen,* rather than living in the spontaneous moment, chooses to obsess about the future or the past, which in reality do not exist and cannot be controlled. The future and the past are merely figments of our imagination, useful to us humans for the purposes of analyzing and planning. Most other life forms do not possess our higher cerebral functions and thus are immune to the effects of liver qi stagnation. The same holds true generally for small children who have not yet learned the stagnant mental habits of their elders.

Emotions are feelings that supply information to the *shen* about the interior of our bodies. Emotions follow thoughts. Thoughts that stagnate in the past are responsible for eliciting stagnated emotions such as guilt, hatred, and melancholy. Thoughts that stagnate in the future are associated with stagnated emotions like dread, worry, and misery. All emotions tell us something, and painful stagnated emotions tell us to return our thoughts to the present.

Two other factors that contribute to liver qi stagnation: A sedentary lifestyle in which physical qi fails to keep moving, and excess body fat, which slows and obstructs the free flow of qi.

Psychosomatic illnesses, for which conventional medicine finds no explanation, provide a long list of physical ailments caused by liver qi stagnation. In response to anxiety, any organ or muscle in the human body can unconsciously contract in a perceived “fight-or-flight” emergency response and remain so for years. Colitis, irritated bowel syndrome, pre-menstrual syndrome, interstitial cystitis, Crohn’s disease, asthma, gastritis, pancreatitis, stuttering, tension headaches, and phantom pains that come and go are common examples of this condition. On some people, all skeletal muscles can become tensed in this way, causing a condition known as “fibromyalgia.”

Chronic liver qi stagnation can by itself create a pathological heat condition. The continuous grinding of qi against a barrier in its attempt to get past creates friction and heat, and all sorts of heat-related pathologies, especially problems associated with heart heat.

When liver qi stagnation occurs with a sudden intensity, that heat may rise, as heat is wont to do, and generate liver wind. Windy turbulence will confuse the qi and blood of the heart and upper body, culminating in many symptoms and disorders such as stoke, panic, dizziness, fainting, tremors, blindness, aneurism, and common hypoglycemia.

Stagnation is pain. Liver qi stagnation is always manifested as chronic physical or mental pain or both. Pain is especially apparent and severe when the qi fails to move the blood adequately. Blood stagnation is perceived as sharp pain in a specific location with possible bleeding, as the blood leaves its vessel in an attempt to keep moving.

When liver does not move qi sufficiently, body fluids can collect into formations and layers of phlegm. Cysts, tumors, excessive blood cholesterol, and other dense material may result. Stagnated phlegm of an insubstantial variety may form around the Chinese heart, confusing the *shen* to such an extent that psychotic behavior is evidenced by hallucinations and behavior entirely inappropriate to the moment. ☯