

Based on the Theory of “Spleen Governing Time”, the Clinical Treatment Guidelines for Menstrual Diarrhea are Explored

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Abstract: Menstrual diarrhea is a common periodic gynecological disorder characterized mainly by loose stools and increased frequency during or before and after menstruation, which seriously affects the physical and mental health of women. “Spleen governs time” comes from “Yellow Emperor’s Inner Canon”, presenting the core ideas of “spleen governs long summer” and “spleen does not govern time”, emphasizing the physiological characteristics and pathological tendencies of the spleen in specific seasons. Based on the connotation of the theory of “spleen governing time”, and in combination with the pathogenesis characteristics of menstrual diarrhea, which is characterized by “spleen deficiency as the root, excessive dampness as the symptom, and aggravation during menstruation”, this paper explores the clinical treatment principles and the application of prescriptions based on this theory, providing new ideas and theoretical basis for the traditional Chinese medicine treatment of menstrual diarrhea.

Keywords: Spleen governs the season; Menstrual diarrhea; Clinical treatment; Spleen deficiency with excessive dampness

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1. Introduction

The theory of “spleen governs time” originated from “Yellow Emperor’s Inner Canon”, based on the holistic concept of traditional Chinese medicine, matching the Zangfu organs with the seasons and the five elements, and proposing two core ideas: “Spleen governs long summer” and “spleen does not govern time”^[1]. But when modern physicians delve into what the spleen governs, the argument given in “Inner Canon” seems rather contradictory. The reason for this is that the viewpoints are different.

“Shi” refers to the season, a concept that originated from ancient humans’ continuous exploration of the dimensions of time and space. The relationship between the five internal organs and the seasons mainly

originated from the ancient Chinese theory of the different affiliations of the five elements and directions and the seasons. It was only after the theory of the four seasons and five Elements was established that the specific affiliations were further explored by later generations.

Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) adopts a unique five-season division system for the annual cycle, which expands the conventional four-season classification into spring, summer, late summer, autumn, and winter. Each season corresponds to one of the five fundamental elements: wood, fire, earth, metal, and water. As the Zang-organ corresponding to the earth element, the spleen is closely associated with late summer. This specific seasonal period is characterized by sweltering heat and heavy humidity, while the spleen has an inherent physiological preference for dry environments and an aversion to pathogenic dampness. For this reason, damp pathogen invasion frequently impairs the spleen's core transforming and transporting functions during late summer.

Moreover, TCM holds the theoretical viewpoint that “the spleen dominates the concluding phase of all four seasons”. Earth Qi prevails at the tail end of spring, summer, autumn, and winter, marking a period of robust splenic activity. In this phase, the spleen is capable of nourishing the heart, liver, lung, and kidney, yet it also becomes vulnerable to functional disorders triggered by unhealthy dietary habits and irregular work-rest routines.

From the perspective of visceral correlation, the seasonal domination characteristic of the spleen is not merely an independent seasonal law of this single organ. Instead, it embodies the spleen's core status as the postnatal foundation of the human body and the origin of Qi and blood production. The spleen digests and absorbs nutritional essences from dietary water and grains, and sustains the physiological functions of other Zang-fu organs via essence distribution. This nourishing effect of the spleen becomes more pronounced during seasonal transition intervals.

Sustained splenic dysfunction will lead to internal accumulation of water-dampness pathogens, which disrupts not only splenic transportation and transformation but also the physiological operation of other visceral organs. For instance, downward pouring of dampness into the large intestine can induce diarrheal symptoms, while dampness stagnation in the Chong and Ren conception vessels may trigger menstrual cycle disorders. This pathological mechanism serves as a key pathological basis for the occurrence of menstrual diarrhea.

2. The pathogenesis of menstrual diarrhea in relation to the theory that the spleen governs time

The core pathogenesis of menstrual diarrhea is spleen deficiency with excessive dampness. During menstruation, Qi and blood descend to the Chong and Ren meridians, exacerbating the symptoms of spleen deficiency. Dampness takes advantage of the deficiency and causes diarrhea to occur. This pathological process is highly consistent with the seasonal characteristics and physiological weaknesses of the spleen in the theory of “spleen governing the season” [2].

2.1. Spleen deficiency is the root cause, and earth does not control water

The spleen governs transformation and is the source of Qi and blood production, and also governs blood. If the spleen and stomach are weak by nature, or if the spleen is damaged due to improper diet, excessive

fatigue, or excessive worry, the spleen fails to function properly, and the essence of food and water cannot be normally transformed and absorbed; water and dampness will remain in the large intestine, resulting in loose stools. During menstruation, Qi and blood descend to the Chong and Ren uteri, and the Qi and blood of the spleen become even weaker. The ability to transform and transport water and dampness is further weakened. Dampness obstructs the intestines, conduction is disrupted, and thus diarrhea occurs. This is consistent with the pathological feature in the theory of “spleen governing time” that when the spleen function is abnormal, water and dampness will be retained internally. Whether in season or not, spleen deficiency is always the root cause of the disease.

2.2. Dampness as the symptom, seasonal induction

Dampness is an important trigger for the onset of diarrhea during menstruation, and its generation is directly related to the seasonal characteristic that “the spleen governs long summer”. During the long summer, dampness is dominant. If dampness is contracted at this time, or if there is a preference for raw, cold, greasy, and rich foods in the diet, dampness is generated, dampness restrains the spleen, the spleen Yang is suppressed, the transformation and transportation fail, and water and dampness accumulate internally. When the menstrual period comes, the Qi and blood descend to the Chong and Ren meridians, the Yang Qi of the spleen becomes even weaker, and the dampness cannot be transported and transformed, thereby causing diarrhea. In addition, on the last eighteen days of the four seasons, the earth energy is dominant. If the function of the spleen is out of balance at this time and water and dampness are produced internally, it can also be a potential cause of menstrual diarrhea, reflecting the influence of the theory of “spleen governing the season” on the regularity of disease onset.

2.3. Dysregulation of the Chong and Ren meridians, mutual disturbance of the spleen and dampness

The Chong and Ren meridians are closely related to the spleen and stomach, and the Qi and blood transported and transformed by the spleen and stomach are the material basis for the abundance of the Chong and Ren meridians. When the spleen fails to function properly, Qi and blood are produced insufficiently, and the Chong and Ren meridians are not nourished. At the same time, water and dampness remain inside, dampness blocks the Chong and Ren meridians, and the circulation of Qi and blood is not smooth, aggravating the imbalance of Qi and blood during menstruation. The changes of Qi and blood in the Chong and Ren meridians during menstruation will in turn affect the spleen, further exacerbating the state of spleen deficiency and excessive dampness, forming a pathological cycle of “spleen deficiency–excessive dampness–Chong and Ren dysfunction–diarrhea”, which also confirms the overall concept in the theory of “spleen governing the seasons” that the Zang-fu organs and the seasons and meridians interact with each other^[3].

3. Clinical treatment guidelines for diarrhea during menstruation based on the theory of “spleen governing the season”

Guided by the theory of “spleen governing time”, the treatment of menstrual diarrhea should follow the core principle of strengthening the spleen and removing dampness, combine seasonal characteristics and physiological changes during menstruation, adopt the strategy of “staged treatment and time-division care”, take into account both symptomatic and root treatment, and harmonize the function of the spleen and the Qi

and blood of the Chong and Ren meridians.

3.1. Staged treatment: Treat the symptoms during menstruation and the root cause during normal times

The onset of menstrual diarrhea has a distinct periodicity. Treatment should be divided into two stages: menstrual and non-menstrual, and the prescription should be adjusted in accordance with the law of Qi and blood changes of the spleen in the theory of “spleen governs time” [4].

3.1.1. Treat the symptoms during menstruation, strengthen the spleen, remove dampness, and stop diarrhea

During menstruation, Qi and blood descend to the Chong and Ren meridians, and the symptoms of spleen deficiency and excessive dampness are particularly prominent. Treatment should focus on strengthening the spleen to remove dampness and astringing the intestines to stop diarrhea, while also taking into account the regulation of Qi and blood in the Chong and Ren meridians, and avoiding greasy substances that are detrimental to the spleen [5]. The common prescription is the modified version of Shenling Baizhu Powder combined with Tongxie Yao. Shenling Baizhu Powder strengthens the spleen and benefits Qi, absorbs dampness and stops diarrhea, in line with the characteristics of the spleen that prefers dryness and dislikes dampness; The pain-relieving formula soothes the liver and strengthens the spleen, and is suitable for diarrhea caused by spleen deficiency and liver depression, as emotional fluctuations during menstruation can easily lead to liver Qi stagnation, wood overflows earth, aggravating spleen deficiency diarrhea. If there is excessive dampness and loose stools like water, coix seed and plantago seed can be added to promote diuresis and remove dampness. If the spleen is weak, the spirit is weak, shortness of breath and lack of speech, *Astragalus membranaceus* and *Codonopsis pilosula* can be added to enhance the power of tonifying Qi; If there is coldness in the uterus and abdominal pain, mugwort leaves and pickled ginger can be added to warm the middle and dispel cold, taking into account coldness in the Chong and Ren meridians.

3.1.2. Treat the root cause in daily life, tonify the spleen, benefit Qi, and consolidate the root

The non-menstrual period is a crucial time for regulating the function of the spleen. One should follow the idea that the spleen is the foundation of the acquired constitution in the theory of “the spleen governs the time”, and use the methods of tonifying the spleen and Qi and nourishing the earth to consolidate the foundation to enhance the transformation and transportation function of the spleen and fundamentally prevent the generation of dampness. The common prescription is the combination of Buzhong Yiqi Decoction and Sijunzi Decoction, modified. The Buzhong Yiqi Decoction raises Yang and ascenders, enhancing the ascending and descending functions of the spleen and stomach Qi movement. The Four Gentlemen Decoction strengthens the spleen and benefits Qi, and is the basic formula for tonifying the spleen. During the long summer, when dampness is dominant, Agastache and Eupatorium can be added to dispel dampness and invigorate the spleen. In the last 18 days of the four seasons, when the earth energy is dominant, it is appropriate to add yams, coix seed, and other neutral foods that nourish the spleen in accordance with the earth energy. At the same time, the prescription can be adjusted according to the patient’s constitution. For example, for those with liver depression, add Bupleurum and *Paeonia lactiflora* to soothe the liver and relieve depression; for those with kidney deficiency, add *Psoralea corylifolia* and Yizhiren to warm and tonify the spleen and kidney. Since “the kidney is the foundation of the innate constitution and the spleen is

the foundation of the acquired constitution”, tonifying both the spleen and kidney can enhance the therapeutic effect.

3.2. Time-based care: Adapt to the seasons and avoid the triggers

Based on the theory that the spleen governs the season, the care of menstrual diarrhea should adapt to the climatic characteristics of different seasons, avoid the inducements that damage the spleen, and assist drug treatment to improve the therapeutic effect.

3.2.1. Care during the long summer season

In the theory of “the spleen governs the season”, the long summer belongs to earth and is governed by dampness, which corresponds most vigorously to the spleen. It is the time of the year when the spleen has the heaviest burden of transforming water and dampness and is most vulnerable to evil. The climate of the long summer is hot and humid, with an abundance of rain and dampness. Dampness is heavy, turbid, and sticky, which is most likely to suppress the Yang of the spleen and impede the movement of Qi. During the menstrual period, Qi and blood descend to the Chong and Ren meridians, and the spleen Qi is already deficient. If the long summer is damp, the external dampness will trigger the internal dampness, the spleen deficiency will be even more severe, and the dampness will be more abundant, which is very likely to induce or aggravate menstrual diarrhea. Therefore, the long summer is a critical period for the prevention of menstrual diarrhea.

Long summer protection should focus on the physiological characteristics of the spleen, which dislikes dampness, prefers dryness, and governs transformation and transportation, with the core being to clear heat and remove dampness, invigorate and strengthen the spleen, and warm and protect the spleen, Yang. In daily life, avoid rain, dew, and dampness, do not sit or lie on wet ground, and reduce exposure to rain and wading through water to prevent external dampness from invading the spleen. The diet should be light, soft, and easy to digest. Avoid raw and cold fruits, cold drinks, and rich and greasy foods to prevent internal dampness. Red adzuki beans, coix seed, poria, agastache, lotus leaves, and other foods that clear summer heat and dampness and invigorate the spleen and harmonize the middle can be used to remove dampness without harming the spleen and clear heat without warming the spleen. If the menstrual period coincides with the long summer and shows symptoms such as sticky stools, burning anus, bitter and sticky mouth, and yellow and greasy coating of damp-heat descending, on the basis of strengthening the spleen, one should combine *Coptis chinensis*, *Phellodendron amurense*, *Portulaca oleracea*, and other heat-clearing and diuretic substances to remove dampness, clear heat, and restore the spleen’s function.

3.2.2. End-of-season care

On the eighteenth day of the end of the fourth season, the earth energy is dominant, and the spleen function is relatively vigorous. It is the best time to nourish the spleen. You can add *Codonopsis pilosula*, *Astragalus membranaceus*, red dates, etc., to your diet to make soup or porridge. At the same time, pay attention to the balance of work and rest, avoid overwork that harms the spleen, keep a pleasant mood, and prevent worry from harming the spleen. Late spring: Soothe the liver and regulate the spleen, transform dampness, and harmonize the middle. Be cautious in damp and shady places, eat less rich and greasy food, and regulate emotions to prevent the liver wood from overtaking the spleen. Late summer: Clear heat and dampness,

warm and invigorates the spleen. Avoid excessive cold drinks and prolonged exposure to cold and dampness. The diet should be light and diuretic. Late autumn: When warming and strengthening the spleen, dispelling cold and strengthening the intestines, pay attention to keeping the abdomen warm, reduce raw and cold fruits, and increase foods that strengthen the spleen and strengthen the intestines. Late winter: Warm the middle to strengthen the spleen, boost Yang to strengthen the root, guard against cold invading the spleen, eat more warm and nourishing foods, and avoid overwork that harms the spleen.

3.2.3. Seasonal care and adjustment

Spring energy connects the liver, liver wood easily overcomes spleen earth; Wind pathogen combined with dampness can easily encase the spleen. Care should focus on soothing the liver and strengthening the spleen, warming and transforming dampness: pay attention to keeping the waist and abdomen warm, and avoid raw, cold and cool foods; The diet should include yam, poria, dried tangerine peel, ginger, etc., to soothe the liver, strengthen the spleen and remove dampness; Avoid wading through water in the rain or sitting on wet ground for long periods. Summer is at its peak of heat and dampness, which can easily dampen the spleen, Yang. In addition to the excessive consumption of cold drinks, it further impairs the spleen's function. To clear summer heat, promote diuresis, warm the spleen, and protect Yang: avoid direct air conditioning and excessive consumption of cold drinks and fruits; Use coix seed, red adzuki beans, agastache, winter melon, etc. to clear the heat and invigorate the spleen; The diet should be warm, soft, and easy to digest to reduce the burden on the spleen and stomach. Autumn is cool and dry, which can harm the spleen Yang and deplete the spleen Yin. It is advisable to warm and nourish the spleen, avoid the cold and protect the middle: Add clothes in time to keep the abdomen warm; Eat less cold melons and vegetables and spicy and pungent foods; Use more lotus seeds, coix seeds, pumpkins, yams, etc. to strengthen the spleen and intestines. The cold of winter is most likely to damage the spleen Yang, causing the curd to be weak and water dampness to descend. Focus on warming the middle, strengthening the spleen, dispelling cold, and stopping diarrhea: Keep the waist, abdomen, and soles warm, and apply warm compresses to the navel and abdomen; Eat more lamb, ginger, longan, etc. to warm the middle and boost Yang; Avoid raw, cold, and cool foods and cold pathogen invasion.

3.2.4. Special care during menstruation

Avoid getting cold during menstruation, especially keeping the abdomen warm to prevent cold invasion of the spleen and stomach; Avoid vigorous exercise to prevent depletion of Qi and blood; Eat warm, easily digestible food and avoid raw, cold, spicy, and stimulating foods; Keep your mood stable and avoid liver Qi stagnation invading the spleen earth.

3.3. Add or subtract based on syndrome differentiation: Take into account both syndromes and be flexible

In clinical practice, the prescription should be adjusted in accordance with the specific complications of the patient to reflect the characteristics of syndrome differentiation and treatment in traditional Chinese medicine. If a patient is accompanied by liver depression and Qi stagnation, with symptoms such as breast distension and pain during menstruation, irritability and anger, and diarrhea with mood swings, the pathogenesis is closely related to the fact that spring Qi affects the liver and liver wood overcomes spleen earth. In spring, Yang energy ascends, and liver energy is excessive, which is prone to invade the spleen; Even if it is not

spring, at the end of the four seasons, when the spleen earth is dominant, the Qi movement is blocked and is easily taken over by the liver, causing abnormal spleen movement and diarrhea. At this time, on the basis of strengthening the spleen and eliminating dampness, add substances such as bupleurum, curcuma, and *Cyperus rhizopus* to soothe the liver and regulate Qi, with the aim of soothing the liver to support the spleen and regulating Qi to assist transportation, so that the liver can move forward without taking advantage of the spleen earth, in accordance with the ascending and descending of Qi in the four seasons, and restore the function of the spleen in governing transportation and transformation. If there is also a deficiency of kidney Yang, with symptoms such as diarrhea at five o'clock in the morning, aversion to cold, cold limbs, soreness and weakness of the waist and knees, it is a deficiency of spleen and kidney Yang, corresponding to the seasonal characteristics of winter Qi that connects the kidneys and fire that does not warm the earth. In winter, cold pathogens are more prevalent and are most likely to damage Yang; Kidney Yang is the root of spleen Yang. If kidney Yang is insufficient, the spleen will lose its warmth, and water dampness will not be able to evaporate and transform. When it descends to the large intestine, diarrhea will not stop. At the end of the four seasons, when the spleen earth is in power, kidney Yang is especially needed to assist in its transformation and transportation. At this time, the Four Gods Pill is intended to warm and tonify the spleen and kidneys, consolidate the intestines and stop diarrhea, so that the kidney Yang is full, the spleen Yang is warm, and the earth gives rise to fire, in line with the “spleen governs the season” principle of strengthening Yang and protecting the spleen Yang in winter and at the end of the season. If it is accompanied by damp-heat descending, with symptoms such as sticky stools, a burning sensation in the anus, and a bitter and sticky mouth, it is often associated with excessive dampness in summer and long summer. In the long summer, dampness is dominant, dampness invades the spleen and turns into heat, and damp-heat descends to the large intestine, causing diarrhea, stickiness, and discomfort. The spleen prefers dryness and dislikes dampness. Excessive dampness causes the spleen to be obstructed, and excessive heat causes the spleen to be damaged. Therefore, on the basis of strengthening the spleen, ingredients such as *Coptis chinensis*, *Phellodendron amurense*, and *Portulaca oleracea* are added to clear heat and promote diuresis, aiming to clear seasonal damp-heat and restore the spleen's transport, so as to eliminate pathogenic factors without harming the spleen and clear heat without attacking Yang, in accordance with the physiological characteristics of the spleen that “dislikes dampness, prefers dryness, and governs the transformation of dampness”.

4. Conclusion

The theory of the spleen governing the seasons is an important manifestation of the holistic concept and syndrome differentiation and treatment in traditional Chinese medicine. Its core idea emphasizes the close connection between the function of the spleen and seasonal changes. The pathogenesis of menstrual diarrhea is based on spleen deficiency and excessive dampness, and the changes of Qi and blood in the Chong and Ren meridians during the menstrual period are highly consistent with the physiological characteristics and pathological tendencies of the spleen to prefer dryness and dislike dampness and to transform and transport water and dampness in the theory of “spleen governing the season”^[6]. The clinical treatment based on this theory adopts the policy of “staged treatment and time-specific care”, strengthening the spleen to remove dampness and stop diarrhea during menstruation to treat the symptoms, tonifying the spleen to benefit Qi and consolidate the root in daily life, and avoiding inducing factors in accordance with seasonal characteristics,

which can effectively regulate the function of the spleen and break the pathological cycle of “spleen deficiency–dampness excess–diarrhea”.

In clinical practice, it is necessary to be flexible and adaptable based on the patient’s constitution, concurrent syndrome, and seasonal differences, taking into account the mutual influence of the Zang-fu organs, meridians, and seasons, and embodying the holistic idea of “harmony between man and nature” in traditional Chinese medicine. Further research on the clinical efficacy and mechanism of menstrual diarrhea based on the theory of “spleen governing time” can be carried out in the future to provide more evidence-based evidence for the treatment of periodic gynecological diseases with traditional Chinese medicine.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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