

Waiting for the next bladder infection

by Joel Whitehead

Just recently, one of our semi-regular patients came in after a long hiatus just to talk to me. She was complaining of a pain in her lower abdomen, above the pelvis. She had been to see the doctor because she was sure it was something quite serious. She was sure he would find a cyst or a herniation or something like that, and seemed quite distracted that he hadn't found it. He (the doctor) offered her something for the pain, but she refused and left, sure that he had missed the diagnosis.

In a way he had. I knew this patient quite well and remembered that when she came to us originally, one of her main complaints was recurring bladder infections. So I asked her to sit down and after massaging a few points on her legs, the pain went away. I told her that the reason it worked so well was because I just treated the same problem that led to her bladder infections and warned her that the onset of yet another one may be around the corner.

She remembered then that she used to get such lower abdominal cramps in the same time proximal to the onset of her other bladder infections. But she was so sick otherwise before she came to see us that at that time it just seemed par for the course.

The underlying condition here was damp heat, and so she took some herbal medicine I prescribed to remove her from the sphere of an acute stage, and she seemed to be renewed within about 5 days without the onset of a bladder infection. The sharp stabbing pain went away, but that weekend she went through some rather classic symptoms that are often associative. She had a headache that made her feel feverish and flushed, though with no real temperature. The headache felt like a tight band around the head accompanied by a stabbing pain. Her mouth was very dry and she wanted cold drinks but not more than a mouthful. Her hands and feet became swollen and warm to the touch and she became quite irritable.

In the West, when we have bladder infections, because we find a bacterial count to be high, we naturally consider that to be the cause and immediately enter into a course or two of antibiotics. Germs proliferate where there is warmth and stagnation. Damp heat meets these two requirements and so we become a breeding ground for germs, and we try to label the germs as the causative factor. But in Chinese medicine we know that it is not the germ that is the problem, but the imbalance of energy which enables the germ to thrive.

Damp heat: why's and wherefores

Damp heat is an energetic condition of the body that is just what it sounds like. Most of the time it starts out as dampness in the body that after stagnating or lying still for awhile, turns to heat. Dampness by itself is quite common in North America as it is endemic in our diet, or may be due to an over-abundance of wet environmental conditions.

Dampness in the body tends to settle in lower regions like the lower abdominal regions, which we call the lower warmer, but it will begin to change the workings of the body as a whole. Dampness by itself causes a fair amount of stagnation, just as a pond in a stream will slow or stop the rush of water moving into it. For the most part dampness attracts coldness and so a person who is more damp will feel chilled through and through. They also have almost no sign of thirst, as they have more fluid internally than they shall ever need.

When this dampness becomes hot as well, which happens to almost anything that doesn't move, stagnation increases and humours inside the body become more sputum-like. Often there may be dry phlegm at the base of our throats that we can't begin to cough up. The classic diagnosis for damp heat is "thirst without a desire to drink." In other words, the mouth becomes dry from the heat, but because we are so full of water already, we only want a mouthful of cold water and just couldn't hold any more. And of course the urine can become hot and burning and hard to force out, causing more pain and consternation.

What you can do

First of all, avoid all damp-forming food and damp or humid environments. Damp-forming foods are sweets, dairy, raw fruits and vegetables eaten during cold and/or damp weather, fried foods, fatty foods (especially cold luncheon meats) and even an excess of cold water when forced down at the wrong times. Eating hot cooked food and drinking hot water helps the internal movement of bodily functions, but spicy, hot food should be taken with great care. (We traced my patient's setback to a pepperoni pizza and beer night).

Alcohol, by itself, can be damp heat forming as it causes an immediate high caloric burn and is merely an exaggerated sugar. More often than not, damp heat problems attack the sedentary and not the active, so making sure that you exercise regularly with proper attention to fluid replenishment with regard to the intensity of activity, is very important to people with such susceptibilities.

Ironically enough, turning to antibiotics may not only not be a solution, but will intensify the proclivity to keep getting the bladder infections. Bacterial resistance builds up and with every successive generation becomes stronger (a generation being only days, weeks or months).

Changing a precondition like damp heat or dampness is not an easy, short-term effort, but the more you can distance yourself from critical levels of the condition the healthier you'll be. Worse yet, bladder infections due to damp heat may be the easiest of the serious problems you could face with this problem. It could make latent conditions of hepatitis or other inactive conditions active, and could even be, as we believe in Chinese medicine, a serious introduction to the proliferation of cancer or venereal diseases.

electronic copy and one paper copy may be made for personal use, but this document may not be distributed under any form, in whole or in part.