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Rheumatoid Arthritis Guide

Treatment techniques based in Chinese medicine



Overview

Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA) is an autoimmune disease characterised by chronic inflammation of the joints and surrounding tissues. It differs significantly from Osteoarthritis (OA), which is primarily a degenerative joint disease caused by wear and tear of the joint cartilage. RA involves the immune system mistakenly attacking the body's tissues, particularly the synovium (the lining of the joints), leading to inflammation and causing the joints to become hot, swollen and painful. In contrast, OA is associated with the breakdown of joint cartilage and bone. Western medicine views Rheumatoid Arthritis as a chronic inflammatory disorder, whilst Chinese Medicine attributes it to a combination of external pathogenic factors, namely Wind, Cold, Dampness and, notably, Heat, invading the body, leading to blockages in the flow of Qi and blood which results in internal disharmony involving the Liver, Kidneys and Spleen. Symptoms of the condition present as joint pain with significant heat in the affected areas, swelling and stiffness, particularly in the morning or after inactivity. This joint pain is usually symmetrical, affecting both sides of the body. There is general fatigue and weakness, often with fever in the event of a “flare-up”, and in severe or advanced cases there may be joint deformity.

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Causes

- External Pathogenic Factors: The invasion of Wind, Cold and Dampness, with a significant emphasis on Heat as a factor contributing to the inflammation and warmth in the joints. These pathogenic factors can significantly weaken the body's defences, obstructing the free flow of Qi and blood in the meridians, resulting in the joint pain, stiffness, heat and swelling so prevalent in RA sufferers.
- Diet and Lifestyle: Poor dietary habits and an overly sedentary lifestyle can weaken the Spleen, exacerbating internal Heat and Dampness accumulation, which will worsen RA symptoms.
- Emotional Factors: Stress and emotional turmoil, leading to Liver Qi stagnation, can exacerbate heat and inflammation, severely affecting joint health.
- Constitutional Health: Weak constitutional health, often due to congenital Kidney fragility can play a significant part in the advancement of Rheumatoid Arthritis.

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Organs Implicated

- **Liver:** The Liver, primarily responsible for the smooth flow of Qi and blood throughout the body, is also crucial in regulating emotions. Emotional stress, common in chronic diseases such as Rheumatoid Arthritis, can lead to stagnation of Liver Qi. It is this stagnation that contributes significantly to the symptoms of RA, including joint pain, heat and inflammation. Persistent Liver Qi stagnation will amplify and exacerbate the generation of internal Heat, resulting in the fever, warmth, itching, pain and swelling of inflamed RA joints. It is, therefore, imperative to soothe Liver Qi in order to alleviate stagnation which can then begin to clear Heat and reduce RA symptoms.
- **Spleen:** Vital for the efficient digestion and transformation of food and nutrients into Qi and blood, as well as helping to control the muscles and limbs. A weakened Spleen, often as a result of poor diet and lifestyle habits or emotional factors such as overthinking or worry, can lead to a deficiency in Spleen Qi which can result in the accumulation of Dampness and Phlegm in the body. When this is coupled with Heat, the overriding pathogen with regards to RA, symptoms of the condition will be exacerbated. A knock-on effect of this is an impaired immune function, further impacting the disease. The aim should be to strengthen the Spleen, resolve Dampness and clear Heat.
- **Kidneys:** Fundamental to bone health, marrow production and overall vitality, the Kidneys are considered the root of Yin and Yang within the body. Kidney deficiencies, whether Yin or Yang, can weaken the bones and joints, making them more vulnerable to the effects of RA, as can be evidenced in chronic cases or older patients. The Kidneys' role in governing the deeper aspects of our constitutional health plays a significant part in the autoimmune nature of Rheumatoid Arthritis, where the body mistakenly turns against itself. Focus should be on nourishing Kidney Yin and Yang to support their role in bone and joint health and conserving constitutional health.

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Note – Although both forms of Arthritis, there are some key differences between Rheumatoid Arthritis and Osteoarthritis:

- RA includes systemic symptoms such as fatigue, fever and Heat, whereas OA is more focused on pain and swelling.
- RA is an autoimmune process, whilst OA is primarily degenerative.
- OA is predominantly linked to Kidney deficiencies, whereas RA involves a more complex interaction between Liver, Spleen and Kidney imbalances, along with the presence of external pathogenic factors like Wind, Cold, Dampness and, significantly, Heat.

Emotions

Our emotions play a significant role in the manifestation and management of RA in Chinese Medicine, affecting not only the organs but also contributing to overall disharmony leading to symptoms such as joint Heat and inflammation. Understanding the connection between emotions and physical wellbeing in the context of severe diseases such as Rheumatoid Arthritis will be a key part of effective management of the disease.

- Liver (Anger/Frustration): Closely associated with the emotions of anger and frustration, Liver Qi stagnation is an important factor in RA. If anger and frustration are allowed to become chronic it can create internal Heat which will severely aggravate inflammation and pain in the joints. This Heat can be viewed as a manifestation of internal emotional Heat. Addressing negative emotions and imbalances can help to alleviate Liver Qi stagnation and, consequently, reduce the Heat and inflammation within the joints.

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- Spleen (Worry/Overthinking): The Spleen is negatively affected by excessive worry and overthinking and it is these emotions that can weaken Spleen Qi, allowing Dampness and Phlegm to gain a hold which, with regards to Rheumatoid Arthritis, can contribute to joint swelling and stiffness. When combined with Heat, Dampness can become more problematic, intensifying symptoms. Stress management practices and dietary adjustments to support and strengthen the Spleen can be beneficial in managing RA symptoms.
- Kidneys (Fear): Fear is the prevailing negative emotion of the Kidneys and when allowed to become chronic or deeply entrenched it can weaken the often already fragile Kidney Qi, which is essential for bone and joint health. Deficient Kidney Qi can result in the body becoming more susceptible to imbalances such as Liver Qi stagnation and Spleen Qi deficiency, thereby indirectly exacerbating the Heat and inflammation associated with RA. Techniques to bolster courage and reduce fear, such as grounding practices, regular gentle exercise, meditation and, especially, adequate rest will go a long way to support Kidney health and overall wellbeing.

Acupressure

Acupressure is a technique that can easily be performed as part of your self-care practices. Gentle pressure is applied to specific points on the body with fingers or an acupressure tool to help clear blockages in the meridians, the pathways of the body through which qi flows.

LI-4 (Hégǔ):

Location: On the back of the hand, on the fleshy part of the webbing between thumb and index finger.

Why: Known for its ability to regulate and release Wind and Heat, LI-4 is often used to alleviate pain and reduce inflammation, making it particularly useful for the hot and swollen joints characteristic of RA. It will also help to balance the immune response, essential for autoimmune conditions such as Rheumatoid Arthritis.

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ST-36 (Zúsānlǐ)

Location: This point is found on the leg, four finger widths down from the bottom of the kneecap, one finger width outside of the shinbone.

Why: ST-36 is a vital point for strengthening the Spleen and Stomach, crucial in resolving Dampness and improving overall energy levels. It also assists in clearing Heat and addressing inflammation. Stimulating this point is also beneficial for overall health and vitality, supporting the body's resilience against chronic illnesses such as RA.

GB-34 (Yánglíngquán):

Location: On the outer side of the leg, just below the knee, in the depression anterior and inferior to the head of the fibula.

Why: GB-34 is significant for soothing Liver Qi and addressing Wind and Dampness in the joints and clearing Liver Heat, making it particularly effective in alleviating the stiffness, pain and heat associated with the symptoms of Rheumatoid Arthritis.

SP-9 (Yīnlíngquán):

Location: On the inner leg, just below the knee in the depression of the lower border of the bony prominence (medial condyle) of the tibia.

Why: Stimulating SP-9 can help in resolving Dampness and is especially beneficial in cases where Damp-Heat is prominent, a common profile in people suffering from RA. This point will support Spleen function, essential for fluid metabolism and joint health, as well as boosting the digestive system which will benefit overall health.

LI-11 (Qūchí):

Location: At the elbow's outer end, on the crease when the elbow is flexed.

Why: LI-11 is a key point for clearing Heat, cooling the blood, draining Damp and expelling Wind, making it especially effective in reducing the heat and inflammation associated with Rheumatoid Arthritis, as well as supporting the immune system, which will be for autoimmune diseases such as RA.

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Yang Sheng Practices

There are many practices, lifestyle choices, self-care tools and supplements that can be used to help manage the symptoms and the root cause of Rheumatoid Arthritis, including:

- **Qigong:** Combining movement and breathwork in a peaceful moving meditation, qigong is excellent for balancing Qi, supporting the key organs of the body and managing stress. This can be extremely beneficial in reducing concerns such as Liver Qi stagnation, which will have a subsequent knock-on effect of addressing Heat. The gentle movements are also beneficial for maintaining joint flexibility and reducing stiffness.
- **Meditation:** Meditation and mindful breathwork can be effective in reducing stress and emotional turmoil, directly impacting Liver health and reducing the Heat and inflammation in the joints. Regular meditation can encourage an improved pain management response and improve overall wellbeing which can be important when dealing with an emotionally and physically debilitating condition such as Rheumatoid Arthritis.
- **Adequate Rest and Sleep:** Proper, restorative, rest and sleep are essential for the body's healing processes; supporting Liver detoxification and Kidney health especially, which is fundamental for bone and joint health. Furthermore, good sleep hygiene can help to reduce the overall inflammatory response and assist with the management of pain and fatigue associated with RA.
- **Diet Therapy:** A diet rich in anti-inflammatory foods, such as leafy greens, berries and omega-3 fatty acids, and low in foods that contribute to Heat and Dampness, such as fried, spicy, or overly sweet foods, is crucial in managing RA symptoms. Thoughtful diet choices will help to reduce joint inflammation and support the Spleen to manage Dampness, thereby reducing swelling and stiffness in the joints.

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- Lifestyle Adjustments: Avoiding exposure to cold and damp environments and engaging in regular, gentle exercise can be extremely helpful in managing RA symptoms. Avoiding smoking and excessive alcohol, both of which can exacerbate Heat and dampness, is also important. These simple adjustments can help maintain a balance of Qi and blood, reducing the impact of external pathogenic factors that contribute to the occurrence and symptoms of Rheumatoid Arthritis.

Useful Supplements

There are many helpful supplements that can be taken as both preventative self-care and to alleviate symptoms of Rheumatoid Arthritis, these include:

- White Peony Root: Effective for cooling blood Heat and nourishing Yin, making it beneficial in cases where RA is accompanied by significant Heat. It can also help to support Liver health.
- Ginger: Known for its warming properties, Ginger can be invaluable in dispelling Cold and improving circulation which can help in managing the inflammation and pain associated with RA. It can be made into a tea, added to food, or even dropped into a warming foot bath.
- Turmeric: Turmeric, particularly its active component curcumin, has strong anti-inflammatory properties, helping to reduce the joint inflammation and pain that accompanies Rheumatoid Arthritis. Additionally, Turmeric can help to balance the immune response, which will be beneficial when managing autoimmune conditions such as RA.
- Dong Quai: Also known as Angelica Sinensis, Dong Quai is renowned in Chinese Medicine for its blood-nourishing properties. It helps in invigorating blood circulation, crucial for addressing the stagnation caused by Cold and Wind, as well as offering gentle warming properties, which will help to counteract Cold in the joints.

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- Omega-3 Fatty Acids: Found in fish oil and flaxseeds, omega-3s are known for their anti-inflammatory properties, which can improve overall joint health and reduce stiffness, which is crucial in managing RA symptoms.
- Medicinal Mushrooms: Reishi is renowned for its immune-modulating and anti-inflammatory properties, as well as its ability to support Liver health, potentially helping to reduce Liver Heat. This can prove invaluable in autoimmune conditions such as Rheumatoid Arthritis. Cordyceps can enhance energy and vitality, along with additional anti-inflammatory benefits.

Conclusion

In Chinese Medicine, Rheumatoid Arthritis is seen as a complex interplay of external and internal factors, involving the invasion of various pathogenic factors – most notably Heat – and the disharmony of Liver, Kidney and Spleen Qi. Addressing emotional health, dietary habits and incorporating Yang Sheng practices such as qigong, meditation and diet and lifestyle considerations will be key in alleviating the inflammation, heat and pain associated with RA, as well as enhancing overall wellbeing and restoring the body's natural balance.

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Want to know more?

We will be delighted to support you as you continue along your Yang Sheng journey.

The following will get you started:

'Yang Sheng: The Art of Chinese Self-Healing' available on Amazon, Waterstone and www.hayoumethod.com

Buy Yang Sheng Book

Healing Movement classes (3 x each week) and live meditations for a more in-depth and healing practice – full details [here](#)

Free Masterclass "[Master Your Health](#)" – understand the 3- step plan for preventative health. Find more Healing Masterclasses [here](#).

Free self-care weekly content [@katiebrindle](#) on Instagram, Facebook and YouTube.

Free regular gua sha demonstrations on [@thehayoumethod](#) Instagram & the opportunity to purchase the accompanying tools from www.hayoumethod.com

DISCLAIMER:

Please note that any of these Yang Sheng techniques are designed to support your overall self-care and wellbeing and should not be used as a substitute for any Western medical advice or treatment that you may be receiving. You should not use the information in this Guide or on our website for diagnosing or treating a health problem or disease and must always consult your doctor if you have any health concerns. Additionally, please note that there are a few contraindications to Yang Sheng techniques, so please visit www.hayoumethod.com to view our comprehensive FAQs.

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