



Wellbeing Clinic Newsletter

Today's Focus:

RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS, ANKYLOSING SPONDYLITIS AND PSORIASIS

It may come as a surprise to some that we have chosen to group the above three autoimmune conditions in the same newsletter. This is because they are closely related. The cause of all three is essentially the same - overreaction of the immune system. Given the significant side effects of conventional medication we believe that Traditional Chinese Medicine can offer a particularly valuable contribution in treatment of these conditions.

Rheumatoid Arthritis, Ankylosing Spondylitis and Psoriasis are autoimmune diseases. Whilst their symptoms are different, their underlying cause is essentially the same – all three are caused by **overreaction of the immune system, which attacks its own body tissues.**

Rheumatoid Arthritis is an inflammation of the joints, causing joints' pain, swelling and stiffness and, in the longer term may result in damage to neighbouring tissues (bones, cartilage, and tendons). The disease can affect any joint but usually the small joints in the hands, wrists and feet are affected first.

Ankylosing Spondylitis is an inflammation of the spine and other parts of the body. The condition causes back pain and stiffness and can also cause inflammation and swelling to other joints such as hips or knees.

Psoriasis is a skin condition consisting in build-up of sore or itchy, flaky patches on the skin, which usually first appear on elbows, knees, scalp and lower back, but can appear anywhere on the body. Due to the common underlying cause, people suffering from Rheumatoid Arthritis or Ankylosing Spondylitis may also develop Psoriasis and inversely, Psoriasis sufferers may be at a higher risk of developing Rheumatoid Arthritis, Ankylosing Spondylitis and other autoimmune conditions.

Other common symptoms of Rheumatoid Arthritis and Ankylosing Spondylitis may include extreme tiredness, loss of appetite, weight loss, high temperature and sweating. If untreated, symptoms may get worse over time, sometimes leading to extensive long-term damage and possibly disability.

Rheumatoid Arthritis can unfortunately lead to other complex conditions such as carpal tunnel syndrome, inflammation in vital parts of the body such as lungs, heart, blood vessels and eyes. It is also associated with an increased risk of heart attack and stroke.

Further severe complications associated with Ankylosing Spondylitis include osteoporosis, iritis (eye inflammation) spinal fractures, inflammatory bowel disease and, similarly to Rheumatoid Arthritis, an increased risk of cardiovascular disease and stroke.

Prompt diagnosis and treatment is therefore vital in order to prevent long-term damage, disability and further health complications.

There is no permanent cure for the above conditions - treatment in both in conventional and alternative medicine is mainly focused on managing the symptoms.

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What are conventional methods of treating this disease?

Conventional medicine solutions include:

- Exercise/ Physiotherapy;
- Medication to relieve symptoms and pain;
- Surgery;
- Topical skin ointments for Psoriasis;

Besides painkillers and steroids used to relieve joint pain and inflammation, one common way of treating Rheumatoid Arthritis and Ankylosing Spondylitis consists in using disease modifying anti-rheumatic drugs (DMARDs) or anti-tumour necrosis (TNF) factor medicine. What is important to know is that both DMARDs and anti-TNF medication are associated with very significant side effects.

DMARDs such as methotrexate or leflunomide are essentially chemotherapy medicines but used in smaller doses than in cancer treatment. This is why they lead to similar side effects as in chemotherapy treatment, including feeling sick, loss of appetite, hair loss, skin reactions, headaches and infections.

Anti-tumour necrosis factor medicine (TNF) works by suppressing the chemicals released by the immune system. What it basically means is that the medicine stops the immune system from "interfering" with

the body but as a result it also deprives the body from its natural immune defences and therefore exposes the patient, among others, to a high risk of developing potentially very serious infections.

How can Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) help?

Traditional Chinese Medicine is very effective in naturally maintaining a healthy functioning of the immune system so that its defensive reactions are no longer triggered against the cells and tissues of its own body.

Whilst it is also not a permanent cure, this can be a life changing help for the sufferers of these diseases, allowing them to maintain a symptom-free, normal quality of life and, very importantly, also avoid or control the side effects caused by conventional medication.

Contrary to the conventional medication, the treatment by TCM is much more balanced as **TCM helps control adverse or excessive immune system reactions and promotes its normal, natural, functions rather than suppressing it altogether.**

Given the significance of the side effects associated with the conventional treatment, our own belief is that it would be preferable to use TCM treatment as a first resort, in particular when the condition is in its early stages and can still be efficiently controlled by natural methods.

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However, **the use of conventional and natural treatment at the same time is not mutually exclusive** and even the patients who are already using the conventional medication can still greatly benefit from TCM, which can help relieve the pain, increase the efficiency of their conventional medication and minimise the adverse side effects. In many cases it may be possible and entirely appropriate, as the condition improves, to gradually reduce the use of the conventional medication and to progressively return to the use of TCM methods as the main method of controlling the condition.

Conventional medical practitioners are very well aware of the significance of the side effects of the conventional medication and are therefore likely to be open to or even sympathetic with the idea of using TCM in the treatment of these conditions, in particular once they witness an improvement of the symptoms following the treatment. If needed, we are able to coordinate our TCM therapy in the way that it supports any ongoing conventional treatment in the best way possible.

What Traditional Chinese Medicine treatments are recommended?

Acupuncture helps control the adverse immune system's reactions and prevents it from causing damage to its own body. In this way the symptoms of the disease can be significantly reduced or eliminated altogether.

Additionally, acupuncture can be very effective as a support treatment used in combination with the conventional medication, as a way of controlling pain, minimising the side effects and enhancing the beneficial effects of the conventional medicines.

Herbal medication is also recommended as a support treatment. Herbal formulas based on a personalised diagnosis are available in our clinic.

Due to a permanent nature of Rheumatoid Arthritis, Ankylosing Spondylitis and Psoriasis, a regular, continuous TCM treatment is recommended in order to control the symptoms and to avoid the long-term damage and complications.

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