



The Falsehood of Stomach Ulcers?

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Ms. Chen walked into my examination room and spoke in her exaggerated voice, “Dr. Ko, this is so ridiculous! I always thought that my stomach problems were caused by stomach ulcer. I went for a gastroscopy recently, and the doctor told me that there was nothing wrong with my stomach, no ulcers, no inflammations. So all the stomach medicines I took are wasted?”

The look on her face almost made me laugh. “So you never had gastroscopy before,” I asked. “Of Course not, I was afraid! With all those years of discomfort, I thought my stomach

is already filled with holes! What if it is cancer? I raised the courage to go for a gastroscopy, and to my surprise, the doctor said my stomach is beautiful!” she replied. “Well, aren’t you glad!” “Well, I am glad, but if my stomach is healthy, why the discomfort? Why the stomach medicines?”

Understanding Organic and Functional Diseases

Stomach discomfort, including nausea, bloating, pain, and acid reflux, may exhibit different symptoms that correspond to their causes. Indeed, examinations by Western medicine may reveal no signs of illnesses, but in TCM, we would make the distinction on whether the issue is an organic one (damage to the organs) or a functional one. Even if the test results indicate everything is normal, the reaction of your body is honest.

Many people have experienced persisting discomforts even though health examinations show otherwise. Generally speaking, when Western medicine



physicians conduct examinations, they are looking for signs of organic diseases, or in other words, diseases that generate from organs. When there are no signs of pathological changes in the organs, they will declare you healthy. In TCM, we refer to diseases that are not organic in nature as functional disease. These underlying issues can be diagnosed by TCM physicians, who operate on a different mode of thinking, through observation, auscultation and olfaction, interrogation, and pulse feeling and palpation (wang wen wen qie)”).

“Why would you believe that you have stomach ulcer without having a proper examination?” I asked, to which she replied innocently, “It says it on the book, and on the magazines too, that certain symptoms point to stomach ulcer. Since I have all those symptoms, I feel like I have it.” Another case of self-diagnosis by books, fallen prey to preconceived notions that are built on falsehood that can very well misguide treatment directions. The patient in this case has mistaken a functional issue as an organic one.

Three-pronged Strategy to Root Out Stomach Disease

There are several major causes of functional issues. The first is the dietary. Our stomach is composed of frail mucous, any intense stimulations from food that are spicy, fried, grilled, sour,

or too hot and too cold, could potential damage the organ. Even if the integrity of the mucous remains, could your stomach truly endure all the stimulations? Have that thought ever crossed your mind as you indulge in the pleasure of feasting?

I have done experiments on thermal expansion and contraction. Muscles contract when come in contact with icy water, a simple mechanism. What is considered icy? Ice cubes, cold drinks with ice removed, food right out of freezer, these are considered icy in TCM, while salads and most fruits are considered cold food. Eating icy or cold food with an empty stomach would cause the smooth muscle in the stomach to spasm and contract, interfering with peristalsis, and causing discomfort. Unrestrained diet may not have any adverse consequence over a short period of time, when problems finally arise, however, they come fierce and hard.

Second is the emotional issue. Autonomous nervous disorder, anxiety, nervousness, depression, and etc., falls into this category. These emotions are even more likely to cause gastrointestinal motility disorder. Overthinking in a troubled time would definitely lead to indigestion; dwelling in anxiety, anger, stress, restlessness, it is only natural that stomach suffers. Most of my current patients fall into this category, who cannot relax when they should. Not only does it lead to motility disorder, it can go



as far as constipation and diarrhea.

Thirdly, irregular lifestyle. Taking three back-to-back shifts, pulling all-nighters, or binging; these overeating, starving, going against the biological clock of the digestive system, is it truly fair to your body? Bullying it today and it will bully you back tomorrow.

Doctors often do this over and over again: reboot. Every treatment aims to reboot human anatomy, so the stomach can return to normal. However, the only reliable solution to these three major issues - diet, emotion, lifestyle - is the preservation of relative stability and normality. I always love to joke my

patient, “(stomach medicine) are to fool your body.” You are only suppressing the symptoms momentarily by taking those medications, other pathological changes like gastric ulcer, duodenal ulcer, or stomach perforation will eventually surface. Any form of discomfort is but a prelude. We should always be aware of reactions from our body, find solutions to the problem rather than relying on medications.

“So a stomach disease is not necessarily referring to ulcer or perforation,” she finally understood.

Indeed, functional problems are a form of stomach disease as well.



For many years, Dr. Ko Chien-Hsin has advised others to regulate their lifestyles and to focus on balanced diet. The photo shows a variety of tonifying zongzi designed by the Hualien Tzu Chi Hospital for visitors to enjoy a healthy Dragon Boat Festival.



We can prescribe medication and implement treatments, yet without proper understanding and compliance and from our patients, a true cure is unattainable. Disease is as resistant as wild fires, fail to root its cause and it will relapse again and again.

Qi Stagnation and Poor Circulation

“So if I do not have stomach ulcer and still feel uncomfortable, aside from the three major issues you have just stated, is there any other causes?” she asked.

After interrogation, and pulse feeling and palpation, her symptoms can be categorized as follow: fear of cold, dark tongue color, poor circulation, and signs of “bruising”. TCM believes that bruising is the result of qi stagnation. Qi is the energy that leads blood circulation, and the stagnation of qi would lead to poor circulation, hence bruising. The solution would be the promotion of qi and activation of blood. The patient complains about cold hands and feet. According to my observation, this fear of coldness is but a falsehood.

“How can it be? I am truly afraid of cold, especially of air conditioners!” she explained hastily.

“There are three possibilities to cold hands and feet, the first is weakness of the heart, second is anemia, third is stress. You belong to the second and third category, a little bit of blood

deficiency coupled with stress,” I point to my heart. “Everything is stuck here, qi stagnation leads to poor blood circulation is the cause of your cold hands and feet. You are not really afraid of cold.”

Many people share the same constitution. They took their symptoms literally and tonify with all-Inclusive great tonifying decoction (shi quan da bu tang), which leads to excessive internal heat. Their body does, in fact, have internal heat available, or rather, embers that easily reignite once fire is lit. When faced with stress, a person’s heat aggregates in the center. The solution, in addition to acupuncture and prescription, is to learn to relax. I often encourage my patients to take strolls, listen to music, meditate, practice yoga and so on. All of these activities help. The emphasis is to relax the body, allow the aggregated heat to disperse and distribute equally to the limbs. This is an issue that cannot be solved by medicating.

“So this is how it is!” Ms. Chen exclaims. She is committed to regulate her lifestyle. When facing people who are really busy, I have only one thing to say, “steal time to eat and sleep.” Eat, meditate, and rest whenever time permit. Never ignore the quality of life because of hectic routine. Stomach ulcer and discomfort may come in different severity, but the solution remains the same: regulate lifestyle, which is the cause of the disease, is the only path to healthiness.