In recent years, there has been a resurgence in the interest in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), not only in China, but also in many Western countries. This is partly related to the perceived shortcomings of orthodox medicines which may not be effective in curing chronic diseases and are often seen as causing more side effects than natural products. Herbal medicines are typically used to promote or maintain good health, and plant products are used in folk medicine and traditional healing systems around the world. Many people in Asian countries choose TCM as a first-line therapy for mild self-limiting illnesses such as upper respiratory infections, or they may turn to this form of therapy when chronic conditions are not adequately controlled with conventional treatments or side effects occur.

One of the chronic diseases for which TCM may play an important role is diabetes mellitus or sugar diabetes, which is increasing in prevalence at an alarming rate in most developing countries. This is related to increased affluence associated with an increased intake of foods high in calories and fat coupled with decreased physical activity, thus resulting in obesity and type 2 diabetes. Although originally called adult-onset diabetes, this disease is fast developing in younger people, even in teenagers, due to their sedentary lifestyles. Some populations may also have some genetic predisposition towards developing diabetes, the so-called “thrifty genotype.” This may have resulted in a survival advantage in the past when there was alternating feast and famine, but in the present day lifestyle of continued feasting this will facilitate the development of obesity and type 2 diabetes.

The risk of having diabetes or a milder abnormality of glucose regulation, shown by high fasting glucose levels or high glucose following glucose loading, increases with age, and in the Hong Kong population in those over 65 years over 50% will have some degree of abnormality. Considering the number of people affected, the chronic nature of the disease and the requirement for chronic medication to control the condition, it is not surprising that many people with this problem consider TCM as an alternative or in combination with orthodox medication. In the ancient practice of TCM, diabetes was not recognized because it was not possible to measure blood sugar. However, the TCM experts recognized a pattern of symptoms similar to those experienced with diabetes and called this Xiao Ke. This was divided into three stages depending on the type and severity of the symptoms. Different combinations of herbs were recommended for the three stages and TCM prescriptions are individualized to match the characteristics of each patient.

Many common plants used as food items or culinary herbs, such as garlic, basil, fenugreek, ginseng and bitter melon, have been attributed with glucose lowering properties. Empirical observations have identified a number of herbal materials that can be used alone or in combination to improve various aspects of the problems of patients with diabetes. Some of these are being subjected to scientific study to attempt to identify active ingredients which may prove to be useful in developing a purified chemical to use as an orthodox medication. Indeed, one of the most popular medications used for diabetes at present is metformin which...
was developed from a plant called goat’s rue or French lilac (Galega officinalis) which was a traditional remedy for diabetes.

With the understanding that control of blood glucose is an important aspect of the management of diabetes, modern Chinese medicine practitioners have integrated some herbs which have this effect into their prescriptions. There are more than 30 herbs commonly used in TCM which are thought to be effective for the clinical treatment of diabetes and its complications. We shall briefly describe seven of the popular herbs, many of which are also considered to have a diuretic property, which increases urination.

The root bark of the Chinese Wolfberry (Lycium chinense) known as Di Gu Pi is thought to lower both blood sugar and blood pressure. This herb is also used to reduce fever and cough. The seeds of the Winter Melon (Benincasa hispida) or Dong Gua Ren are used as a diuretic to reduce swelling and also to reduce fever and this herb appears to reduce blood sugar. The dried roots or tubers of the Chinese Yam (Dioscorea opposita) or Shan Yao are sweet in taste and mild in nature. This is used to lower blood sugar as well as for diarrhea, chronic cough, enuresis and frequent urination. The herb Yu Mi Xu consists of the dried style and stigma of the Indian Corn (Zea mays). It is sweet in taste and mild in nature and is also used as a diuretic and to lower blood sugar and blood pressure.

Job’s Tears (Coix lacryma-jobi) or Coix Seeds are a common food item. This is used as the herb Yi Yi Ren which is sweet and bland in taste, slightly cold in nature, and is thought to have diuretic and decongestant effects and is used to treat inflammation, diarrhea and reduce blood sugar. The tuber of the Oriental Water-Plantain (Alisma orientalis) or Ze Xie is sweet and bland in taste, cold in nature and promotes diuresis so is used to increase urination as well as to relieve diarrhea and to lower blood sugar. The bark of the Amur or Siberian Corktree (Phellodendron amurense) known as Huang Bo is thought to have antipyretic and antibacterial effects and is used for urinary tract infections and also to lower blood pressure and blood sugar.
These are just a few of the herbs used in TCM for diabetes or the related symptoms or problems. Practitioners of TCM adopt a holistic approach; providing compound prescriptions as well as advise patients on appropriate diet and other lifestyle measures which are fundamental to the effective management of diabetes and its complications. For most people, this will include weight reduction and an increase in physical activity. For specific advice on these lifestyle changes, people should consult an appropriate professional. It is important to remember that while the use of the herbs mentioned above or other herbal products may have beneficial effects, such remedies are not a substitute for obtaining proper professional advice. Prolonged self-medication with herbal or other materials without appropriate monitoring may allow the development of irreversible damage which could have been avoided by using other forms of treatment.

Orthodox medicines and TCM should be regarded as complementary and may be used effectively in combination but it is essential to advise practitioners from both disciplines of all the medications and herbal materials that are being taken to avoid potentially harmful interactions. Further research will help to identify how the combined treatment with Chinese and Western medicine can provide an integrated treatment for people with diabetes to produce the maximum beneficial effects.

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