

Adjusting to Change—Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) Perspective

BODY & SOUL

By Doris Rathgeber

Have you just moved to Shanghai and your body does not yet feel quite comfortable in your new environment? If so, read the following thoughts with an open and calm mind.

Relocating to a new continent, a new country or even a new city is an enormous change for a person and his family. While it can be exciting to experience a new culture and lifestyle, it can also be overwhelming to be confronted with so many simultaneous changes and demands. Expatriates often suffer from feeling emotionally unwell after moving to their new environment. Typical psychological symptoms associated with change are being light-headed, nervous, restless, moody and impatient. In terms of the physical ailments, some people suffer from minor symptoms such as irregular bowel movements, stomach pain, diarrhea or constipation, loss of appetite, nausea, itchy skin, eczema, sleeping problems,

and fatigue. Children often complain about many ailments and may need a bit of extra attention during this transitional period.

Keeping in mind how difficult a move can be, we advise that you integrate yourself and your family into your new environment slowly – step by step. Second, determine what makes everyone feel safe and relaxed and with this in mind, establish certain routines or rituals. For example, children often respond well to established mealtimes. These two steps can allow for a gradual adaptation to one's new physical and emotional environment.

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM)

In Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), the occurrence of altering symptoms during the process of adaptation can be summarized under a single medical condition that is called “*Shui Tu Bu Fu*” (水土不服). This term liter-

ally means that water and earth do not fit together or that the body has not yet adjusted to the new water and earth system.

The ancient Chinese understood that a phase of adaptation has to be achieved before one can feel safe and comfortable in a new environment. In general, health is always related to a person's environment, and many external factors can influence one's personal wellbeing. For example, after moving from a home in a low-altitude area to a home in the mountains, a person might suffer from altitude sickness due to the thin air, low air pressure, and climate change. Or if a person moves from a rural to an urban area, the unanticipated exposure to noise, light and other stimuli can overwhelm the mind, causing the body to react negatively. In the latter case, gastrointestinal, respiratory or psychological symptoms can be observed.

According to TCM, a healthy and functioning digestive and respiratory system, as well as strong kidneys can



significantly help a person adapt to a new environment. The health of every organ system strongly depends on the flow of Qi energy (life energy) throughout the organ. However, the kidneys and the digestive system play an essential role in the circulation since they not only store but also generate new energy. First, there is the original, pre-heaven energy, also called the body's constitution, which is stored in the kidneys. A baby receives this from his parents at birth and it is consumed during one's life. Some activities - such as working late at night - not only consume a disproportionate amount of energy but also deny the body an opportunity to rest and rebuild energy sources. Second, there is

a post-heaven Qi energy that can be ensured by consuming healthy foods since the energy is obtained and stored in the digestive system. The digestive system supplies the other organs with Qi energy that protects the body from *evil intruders* that can cause diseases, such as severe weather conditions (e.g. wind, cold, heat, humidity and dryness).

On the other hand, the body's skin is called the outer lungs and belongs to the respiratory organ system. With the help of the protective Qi (referred to as immune system in Western Medicine) that is flowing beneath the skin, the skin shields the body from outside influences. During your first few months in a new environment unknown disease-

The following are some useful points to keep in mind:

1. Always try to avoid sunburn (reddening of the skin), regardless of your skin type, as it indicates excessive sun exposure and skin damage. Your skin will produce a sufficient amount of daily vitamin D at UVR levels well below those that cause sunburn.

2. Current medical evidence suggests that if you are not able to obtain adequate vitamin D from sunlight and foods, the next best option is supplements prescribed by your physician. Keep in mind, however, that UVR may have beneficial effects independent of and beyond those of vitamin D levels and supplementation.

3. Protection does not mean avoiding the sun altogether. It means getting adequate amounts of sun and then using protective measures - such as sunscreen with SPF 15 or above, umbrellas, long sleeved and loose fitting clothing - to avoid over exposure. People with fair skin need to use protective measures during peak UV times (between 10am - 3 pm) on days when the UV index rating is three and higher. In fair skinned individuals, exposing the face, arms, and hands to the sun for 10 minutes in the summer, 15-20 minutes in the spring and autumn, and 30 minutes in the winter outside peak UV times should generally be sufficient.

4. Unfortunately, there are no standard UVR exposure guidelines for those who are not fair skinned. A study published in the Journal of Photochemistry and Photobiology showed that, when compared to the lightest Caucasians, Asians required approximately two times more exposure to safely achieve sufficient vitamin D production while very black skinned individuals required up to six times more.

5. During winter months, areas of the world above a 40 degrees latitude - such as France, Italy, UK, northern China, and northern Japan - generally do not achieve a sufficient level of UVR exposure to achieve vitamin D production. As a result, adequate fat stores of vitamin D need to be accumulated during the spring, summer, and autumn months; otherwise vitamin D supplementation via fortified foods and/or tablets will be required during the winter.

6. Tanning booths should not be used as a means for UVR exposure as they have not been adequately studied with regards to long-term safety or effectiveness.

7. Risk factors for vitamin D deficiency include excessive use of sunscreen, obesity, black skin, homebound older people, and living in areas above latitude of 40 degrees.

There remain numerous unanswered questions regarding the various roles of vitamin D and the sun exposure needs for different populations. However, current medical guidelines recommend that significant vitamin D deficiency should be corrected. If you have reason to suspect you are at risk for vitamin D deficiency, consult your physician about checking your 25-hydroxy vitamin D level. ■

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