



Liver-stomach disharmony pattern: theoretical basis, identification and treatment

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Abstract The pattern of disharmony between the liver and stomach is widely observed in patients with digestive diseases, such as gastroesophageal reflux disease, chronic gastritis, and functional dyspepsia, etc. In order to gain a full and systematic understanding of this pattern, we reviewed the functions and physiological characteristics of the liver and stomach and the liver–stomach relationship. In this review, we discuss the pathogenesis and identification of the pattern, as well as the commonly used classical formulas for its treatment, including Left Metal Pill (*Zuojin Wan*) and Bupleurum Liver-Soothing Powder (*Chaihu Shugan San*). Besides, we provide two examples of clinical modifications of these formulas in the treatment of chronic gastritis and gastroesophageal reflux disease in this article. It should be noted that in clinical practice, these formulas should be used flexibly, and modified in accordance to the specific condition of the patient.

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Liver-stomach disharmony pattern is common in traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). It refers to the pattern due to failure of smooth flow of liver qi and stomach qi descending. It mainly manifests as distension, fullness and pain in

the epigastrium and hypochondrium, belching, hiccups, acid reflux, bad mood or irritability, poor appetite, thin white or yellow tongue coating and wiry pulse, etc.^{1–3} Clinically, such a pattern is widely observed in digestive diseases, such as gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD), chronic gastritis, and functional dyspepsia, etc.^{4–6} In this article, the pathogenesis, common manifestations and classical formulas concerning this pattern are systematically reviewed and discussed with TCM theory, which will

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provide the guidance for identification and treatment of this pattern in clinical practice.

Theoretical basis

Main functions and physiological characteristics of the liver and stomach

Zang-fu theory is an important part in the theoretical system of TCM. According to the theory, there are five major functional systems within the human body, connecting all the body constituents, organs and orifices through the channel and collateral systems, with the five *zang* organs as the core and combined with the six *fu* organs, qi, blood, fluids and essence as their material basis. The five *zang* organs refers to the liver, heart, spleen, lung and kidney, while the six *fu* organs refers to gallbladder, small intestine, stomach, large intestine, bladder and *sanjiao*.

As a *zang* organ, the liver has two major functions. First of all, the liver stores blood, which means the liver serves to regulate blood volume and help to prevent bleeding. Secondly, the liver governs the free flow of qi, which refers to the liver's ability to promote the flow and distribution of blood and fluids, the ascent of spleen qi and the descent of stomach qi, the regulation of emotional activities, as well as ejaculation, menstruation and ovulation, etc. The liver's dynamic nature is of ascent and dispersion.⁷⁻⁹

As a *fu* organ, the stomach has the function of governing reception and decomposition of food and drinks which are sent downward to the stomach via mouth and digested to chyme by the stomach qi. The stomach qi has the tendency to descend and ensure unobstructed status of the stomach and intestines. In the process of digestion, food is received by the stomach, digested, and transmitted to the small intestine by the downward movement of the stomach qi.⁷⁻⁹

Liver-stomach relationship

A full understanding of the relationship between the liver and stomach must involve the five elements theory. The five elements theory is an ancient Chinese philosophy used to explain dynamic relationships between objects in the material world. The five elements refer to the wood, fire, earth, metal and water. The motion among them maintains a dynamic balance in nature. There are two specific modes for their normal relationship, i.e. the generation cycle and the restriction cycle. There are also two specific modes for their abnormal conditions, namely the over-restriction cycle and the counter-restriction cycle.⁹ Take the wood and earth as an example. Their normal relationship is the wood restricting the earth, while their abnormal conditions are the wood over-restricting the earth and the earth counter-restricting the wood.

Applying the five elements theory to TCM, the five *zang* organs are thought to correspond to the five elements, accordingly, with the liver pertaining to the wood, the heart to the fire, the spleen to earth, the lung to metal, and the kidney to water. The spleen and stomach are closely related as a pair, and both of them are located in the middle *jiao* according to the *zang-fu* theory. Therefore, the stomach also pertains to the earth, as recorded in *Yellow*

Emperor's Canon of Medicine-Plain Conversation (Huangdi Neijing Suwen).

As mentioned above, the liver pertains to the wood and the stomach pertains to the earth. Under normal circumstances, wood restricts earth. When the liver maintains the free flow of qi, it promotes the stomach qi to descend normally. However, under abnormal conditions, both the over-restriction and the counter-restriction can lead to disharmony between the liver and stomach. If the wood (liver) is too hyperactive and over-restricts the earth (stomach), it may lead to a deficiency of the earth (stomach). If the earth (stomach) is too powerful, it may counter-restrict the wood (liver). In clinic, the over-restriction of the earth (stomach) by the wood (liver) is more common, thus it is the highlight of this article.

How this pattern is formed

Generally, there are two pathogeneses for this pattern, one is due to the liver qi stagnation, which mainly results from emotional disorders; and the other one is due to liver stagnation transforming into fire, which was recorded as "qi stagnation can transform into fire" in the classics of *Teachings of [Zhu] Danxi (Danxi Xinfu)* in Yuan Dynasty.

To be specific, **(1) liver qi invading the stomach**. As the stagnant liver qi transversely attacks the stomach, the stomach qi would also become stagnated or even flow adversely, leading to the stomach qi failing to descend. **(2) liver fire invading the stomach or liver-stomach heat transformed from qi stagnation**. Long-term liver qi stagnation may transform into fire. Besides, both the stagnant liver qi and stomach qi can transform into heat. Fire and heat are in the same category but are called by different names depending on the severity. Thus, the liver fire invades the stomach, resulting in the stomach's dysfunction in governing the descent.

Identification

According to the different pathogeneses and clinical manifestations, liver-stomach disharmony pattern can be summarized as the following two sub-patterns.

Liver qi invading the stomach

The manifestations of this sub-pattern can be divided into the following two groups: **(1) liver qi stagnation**. This is chiefly manifested as fullness and distending pain in the hypochondrium, bad mood, and wiry pulse, etc. **(2) stagnant and rebellious ascent of stomach qi**. This usually presents as fullness and distending pain in the epigastrium, poor appetite, hiccups, belching, and thin white tongue coating, etc.

The route of the foot *jueyin* liver channel is distributed in the rib-sides. If there is any emotional disturbance, the liver fails to govern the free flow of qi, which leads to liver qi stagnation and unsmooth flow of qi in the liver channel, so there would be fullness and distending pain in the hypochondrium. Failure of free flow of qi by the liver causes bad mood. As the stagnant liver qi transversely attacks the stomach, the stomach qi ascends, presented with

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