

TCM and Nutrition: Kidney Yin Deficiency

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Under the surface of our fast-paced lives our Kidney Yin may well be draining away. Kidney Yin represents the nest-egg of nourishment deep within us. It corresponds to the parasympathetic system, responsible for restoration and revitalization. Many of us are so caught up in the drama of Kidney Yang with its action-packed stimulation that we fail to refresh our Kidney Yin; yet, if we neglect it, we run the risk of depleting our core vitality.

As Daverick Leggett, author of *Recipes for Self-Healing*, says, “Yin is like a well which must not run dry, a reserve of nutrients which form the basis of growth and the fuel for all physiological activities.” In this article we’ll explore the Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) view of Kidney energy, and specifically the pattern known as Kidney Yin Deficiency. We’ll learn how to recognize it in ourselves and in our clients, and discover the secrets to replenishing its life-giving power.

Main Function of the Kidneys

The role of the Kidneys is to store life essence, govern reproduction and growth, maintain bones and brains, control the flow of urine and keep the will power strong. Kidneys are vital to every other organ system in TCM.

Jing Essence

We inherit Jing or essence from our parents, and we also create new Jing from the air we breathe and the food we eat. This is the nucleus of our get-up-and go, the foundation for our zest in life. If our parents were old or ill when we were conceived, we inherit less Jing. If we indulge in too much sex, drugs and rock and roll, we quickly burn through Jing. If we breathe poor air or breathe shallowly, we add less Jing to our Kidney stores. If digestion is impaired or if we eat poor quality food, we create less Jing. Ultimately, when we completely run out of Jing, we die.

Sex

Kidney energy or Qi provides the juice for sexual desire, fertility, reproduction, and growth. If we were to draw a parallel between TCM and Western physiology, the action of Kidney Qi would be similar to the endocrine system with its hormonal influences. Substances that stress the adrenal glands, such as caffeine, are draining to Kidney Qi. Deficient Kidney Qi could mean issues with infertility, slow growth, low libido, and aging.

Bones and Brains

Kidneys produce the Marrow which includes the brain, the spinal cord, the bone matrix and marrow. When I practice CranioSacral Therapy I sense I am working deeply with Kidney Qi as I palpate the flow of the cerebral spinal fluid and the tension in the membranes surrounding the central nervous system. Drugs that imbalance brain chemistry are especially draining of Kidney Qi. Drawing a parallel to Western thought, Kidney energy could be corresponded to the neurotransmitters that send messages across nerve synapses. Low Kidney Qi may manifest as poor nerve function, memory problems, weak teeth or osteoporosis.

Note: In TCM, Kidneys are referred to as a whole system in the body and mind, and not an individual organ pair as we talk about in the Western anatomical and physiological approach. To remind us of this difference the words referring to TCM are capitalized.

Urine

Kidneys are correlated with the Water element and Kidney energy acts as a gate that opens and closes to control the flow of urine. If this gate is too open there will be copious pale urination, a sign of Kidney Yang deficiency. If the gate is too closed, there will be dark and scanty urine, a sign of Kidney Yin deficiency.

Will-Power

The ability to use our will power to express our unique creativity is dependent on good Kidney energy. With strong Kidney Qi we have the resolve to overcome fear and to pursue goals. If Kidneys are weak, our sense of purpose will be shaky and we will be easily distracted.

	Main Functions of the Kidneys
1.	Store Jing (life essence)
2.	Govern birth, growth, sexuality and reproduction
3.	Produce Marrow
4.	Govern Urine Flow
5.	House Will Power

<u>Yin</u>	<u>Yang</u>
moist	dry
cool	warm
receptive	active
deep	superficial
nourishing	energizing
Blood	Qi
Downward	Upward

Kidney Yin Deficiency - Signs and Symptoms

(from *The Foundations of Chinese Medicine* by Giovanni Maciocia)

Dizziness	Vertigo	Tinnitus
Poor memory	Deafness	Night sweating
Dry mouth at night	5-palm heat	Thirst
Sore back	Ache in bones	Nocturnal emissions
Dark-scanty urine	Constipation	

Tongue: Red, no coating, cracks Pulse: Empty and rapid

Key Symptoms: Dry mouth at night, night sweating, red-peeled tongue

Emotional / Mental Signs of Kidney Yin Deficiency

Feeling deeply drained
Fear, anxiety, paranoia, panic
Memory and concentration problems
Lack of inner calm and strength
A floating or drifting sensation

Signs and Symptoms

In our nutrition offices we often meet people who have Kidney Yin Deficiency. The main signs and symptoms are dry skin, dry eyes, vaginal dryness for women, dark scanty urine, a pale face with flushed red cheeks, a red peeled tongue, a rapid pulse, fatigue, irritability, afternoon heat, night sweats and hot flashes. Emotional or mental signs might be agitation or even panic attacks, feeling tired but wired, a sense of floating, or of being drained. Nutritional recommendations focus on foods that build the Yin or healthy moisture in the body, at the same time nourishing the Kidney energy. The key is to realize that the heat signs are not a sign of excess heat, but a deficient heat that reveals a lack of cooling moisture in the body.

Menopause and Kidney Yin Deficiency

Menopause often results in the classic signs of Kidney Yin Deficiency.

According to TCM, menopause occurs because we have used up much of our inherited Jing, and at the same time digestive power has decreased so we create less Jing from food. The net loss of Jing results in the creation of a smaller amount of Blood. The available Blood is used to nourish the organs and sinews, with no leftovers to overflow the uterus. The result is the cessation of menses.

Menopause is natural and reflects our bodies' intelligent conservation of Jing; but at this crucial transition stress, emotional upset, nutritional deficiency, overwork, or other physical dysfunction can throw off the balance between Yin and Yang. Yin Deficiency means that there is more Yang relative to Yin. If there is not enough of either, the lack of relative Yin will mean that there will be more signs of Yang's heat and dryness.

Excessive Heat or Not Enough Yin?

Many years ago I was in an acupressure class practicing pulse reading. There was a middle-aged woman who acted in an aggressive way throughout the class. Her voice was loud, her face was flushed, her manner was irritable and impatient. She was sure that Excess Yang was her pattern. After spending a weekend in class with her, I thought she had Excess Yang too. Finally the teacher listened to her pulses which were rapid, noticed her red tongue with no coat, and said that she didn't have Excess Yang, she had Deficient Yin. She seemed surprised at recognizing her Deficiency, and all the hot energy drained out of her. She looked crestfallen and tired; her voice got soft and weepy, and it became clear that her intensity had covered a deep exhaustion. In that moment I understood how Deficient Yin may masquerade as Excess Yang.

Key Foods To Build Kidney Yin

The key piece of nutritional wisdom is to focus on tonifying foods that moisten, along with some mildly cooling foods, and to resist a temptation to overdo cooling foods that may put out a fire that's not as strong as it seems.

A wide and varied diet – Kidney Yin is about the deep reserves in the body including nutritional reserves. Suggest a varied diet that provides a broad array of vitamins, flavonoids, carotenes, trace elements, minerals, and amino acids. This is not the time to eat the same foods over and over again.

Water – Since Yin is about moisture, suggest ample water throughout the day.

Salty flavored foods: miso, sea salt, tamari, salted raw sauerkraut or kimchee (Korean cultured vegetables). Each of the five elements in TCM has a flavor attributed to it, and the Water flavor which governs Kidneys is salty. To support the Water element, recommend a healthy amount of salt, as too much salt will have the opposite effect. Check to make sure your client is not getting too much, and that she has replaced commercial table salt with sea salt.

Kidney shaped foods: black beans, kidney beans, most beans – Because beans are kidney shaped as well as seeds with potential for new life, these foods have long been considered especially nourishing to the Kidneys.

Blue and black foods: Blueberries, blackberries, mulberry, black beans – The colors blue and black correspond to the Water element of the Kidneys. It is possible to strengthen the Water element by eating blue/black foods.

Seafood: fish, shrimp, seaweeds – all support the Water element.

Seeds: flax, pumpkins, sunflower, black sesame – seeds relate to fertility and growth which is governed by Kidney energy.

Nuts: Walnuts, Chestnuts – Nuts are seeds. These nuts are particularly recommended for Kidney energy.

Animal Products: Pork, duck, lamb, eggs, cheese – Small amounts of animal protein can be used therapeutically here. Bob Flaws, L.Ac., author of *The Tao of Healthy Eating* says, "... animal foods

are the most direct way to get the building blocks and constituents of this Yin essence.” Pork and duck are considered moistening.

Since animal products are dense foods there are some cautions: If there is digestive impairment, the high fat content of duck may be too much. Lamb is the most warming of the meats, so if the person has a lot of hot flashes or night sweats, this may not be appropriate. Excess cheese may be too dampening for the Spleen. Too much meat, particularly without the balance of vegetables, will Stagnate the Liver and create heat. Look to the individual to decide on the ideal amount of animal products.

Bone-Marrow Broths & Soups – This will nourish Marrow governed by Kidneys. Especially beneficial for people wanting to prevent or heal osteoporosis.

Grains: Barley, Millet. These are both mildly cooling and nourishing to Yin.

Vegetables: Asparagus, Deep green leafy vegetables – Since it has diuretic properties, asparagus is especially helpful with opening the flow for those with dark, scanty urine. Deep green leafy vegetables build the Blood, and since Blood is a Yin fluid, they are highly recommended. Also moist vegetables such as cucumbers and celery are helpful.

Fruits and Melons: These are emphasized since they are moistening and mildly cooling. Too much fruit can be too cooling resulting in diarrhea, but 2-4 pieces of fruit a day should be fine.

Tonics: Spirulina, kelp, chlorella, wheatgrass – These mineral rich foods build the Blood which enhances Yin. They are also high in nucleic acids (RDA/DNA) which have been shown to reduce signs of aging.

Mineral rich herbs: Nettles, Oatstraw. Nettles is a gentle, cooling tonic that supports the Blood and Kidneys, while oatstraw strengthens the nerves.

Moistening herbs: Marshmallow, slippery elm, comfrey, aloe vera gel – these are all moistening demulcents with high mucilage content. Flax seed tea could be used here too.

Chinese Herbs: Rehmannia root - often found in the patent formula used for Kidney Yin Deficiency called “Six Flavor Tea Pills” or “Rehmannia Six”

Lifestyle Shift: Plan a Kidney Yin Building Day

Take a break from the stimulation of media: newspapers, radio, tv, movies, to help you go deeper inside to restore the Yin. In his book, *Healing with Whole Foods*, Paul Pitchford says, “ *Perhaps the most important factors for increasing vitality in old age are those practices which deepen spiritual awareness, along with an attitude that applies them consistently in daily life*”. No matter your age, if you experience some Kidney Yin Deficiency signs, schedule a day for contemplation and renewal. Though winter is a particularly beneficial time for this, it can be done anytime.

Sample Kidney Yin Day

Upon arising: A glass of warm water

Contemplative activity: Gentle stretch followed by prayer / meditation

Breakfast: Yogurt with blueberries or blackberries, sunflower and flax seeds

Beverage: Nettle tea

Restorative Activities: walking, tai qi, relaxed creative projects

Beverage Break: A glass of water (room temperature)

More Restful Activities: Crafts, poetry, journal writing

Mid-morning snack: Freshly toasted pumpkin seeds with a little sea salt.

Beverage break: Two teaspoons of aloe vera gel in a glass of water (room temperature)

Lunch: Seafood on a bed steamed deep green leafy vegetables with a side of millet

Exercise: Gentle walk

Contemplation: Afternoon meditation and journal writing

Beverage break: A glass of water (room temperature)

Rest: Lying in a hammock and reading, or listening to a guided imagery tape

Afternoon snack: Fruits

Beverage break: A glass of water (room temperature)

Activity: Restorative yoga poses, qi gong

Dinner: Black bean and barley soup, flavored with miso

Dessert: Baked pear with walnuts and raisins

Evening beverage: Marshmallow & Oatstraw tea

Before bed: A warm bath with your favorite relaxing music, watch a candle burn

Go to sleep early

**To nourish the Kidney
is to become more and more connected
to our own spontaneous impulses
and the will to live.**

- Daverick Leggett
Recipes for Self-Healing