TCM Solutions for Osteoporosis and Bone Diseases

By Kate Ross

Ten million Americans over the age of 50 have osteoporosis; another 34 million are currently at risk of developing it. These statistics come from the U.S. Surgeon General, who recently issued his first-ever warning of the seriousness of rising cases of osteoporosis and bone disease in the United States.

The widely held view that osteoporosis is a natural and unavoidable consequence of aging is being challenged by Dr. Richard Carmona, who is trying to increase awareness about the importance of better bones as the problem increases incrementally with our aging population.¹

Each year, over 1.5 million Americans suffer a bone fracture because of osteoporosis. The surgeon general estimates that within 15 years, half of all Americans over age 50 will be at risk for osteoporosis-related fractures. The point of his warning is a call for action to increase awareness, diagnosis and treatment of this bone disease, which has been referred to as "the silent killer."

The World Health Organization declared 2001 through 2010 as "The Bone and Joint Decade" for the same reason: bone health is woefully in need of attention and repair worldwide, irrespective of cultural, social or economic differences.

Traditional Chinese medicine’s approach to health offers the most holistic solution for eradicating the source of bone diseases. Traditional Chinese medical theory states, "The kidneys are in charge of the bones." This theory from The Yellow Emperor’s Internal Classic believes that the growth, development, repair and senility of the skeleton is closely related to the kidneys. It is the kidneys that dominate the bones’ growth of marrow and promote the general of vital essence (qi), the vital energy believed to be responsible for health and vitality throughout the body.

The understanding of the kidneys being "in charge of the bones" means the physiological and pathological mechanism of the bones is dominated by the function of the kidneys. As one ages, often the kidneys and other organs become weaker and burdened with toxins, and the level of minerals in the bones begins to decrease gradually. Beginning from the age of 50 for females, the mineral levels in the bones drop quickly. For males, the decease of minerals in the bones becomes more significant after age 64.
Studies done at the Traditional Medicine Research Institute in western China measured the bone mineral level and bone density of women after menopause. The research showed that the earlier the onset of menopause, the lower the bone density became, along with the appearance of kidney weakness. One of the conclusions was that "the increase of bone mass in amount and density and the increase of age have a close relationship with the abundance of, or decline of, kidney qi." The same study also found that "people suffering from kidney failure have lower bone density than healthy people of the same age. The more deficient the kidneys, the lower the bone density."

Blood stasis, also associated with qi, is the second root cause for bone diseases according to traditional Chinese medical theory. Research findings reported stagnancy of qi and blood stasis at the core of orthopedic diseases. Promoting blood circulation to remove the stagnancy and stasis to produce new bone are considered important measures for preventing and treating osteoporosis. Western medicine strongly supports this theory, and repeatedly encourages vigorous exercise for general well-being and weight-bearing exercise for bone health. Both cultures agree that when blood and oxygen supplies to the bones are increased, bone nutrition improves and bone density increases.

Traditional Chinese medicine, having been present for thousands of years, has ancient formulas for every aspect of human health and wholeness. Of course, the TCM emphasis has always been on strengthening health without causing harmful side-effects. In addition, the other modalities, Chinese herbal remedies for different problems have been time-tested for thousands of years. These ancient herbal formulas seem to be experiencing an upsurge of interest from the West, as modern science looks for harm-free and proven remedies to age-old problems. Ironically, it is modern science, with its precise forms of laboratory testing, that can validate the results found in ancient texts and formulas, which were developed with a more profound understanding of the relationships between plants (herbs), humans, and the cosmos.

One of these ancient formulas specifically designed to heal bone problems by strengthening the kidney, liver and spleen originated in the southern Yunnan province, which is known for its plants and healing herbs. These ancient herbal formulas, newly revived, take into account not only the yin/yang balance of the body and the specificity of herbal contributions, but also the "hosting," or receptivity, of different parts of the cells with particular herbs. The ancients were keenly aware that bone remedies, in addition to strengthening the kidneys and overall vitality (qi), had to include herbs that would specifically be directed to the ends of the bones, where callous tissue grows and new bone cells can contribute to new bone growth.
Clinical research conducted at a number of top hospitals in China, including the Traditional Medicine Research Institute, has found that specific formulas with rich kidney tonic ingredients, as well as amino acids and compounds that could revitalize the cell systems, had a good effect on the treatment of osteoporosis. Other clinical research found that the herbs were effective in treating necrosis of the femoral head and promoting faster recovery from traumatic fractures, shortening the period of treatment by as much as one-third to one-half. The formulas exhibited anti-inflammatory and analgesic effects, reduced pain and swelling, and improved blood circulation and microcirculation of injured tissue and organs.

Acupuncture professionals can play an important role in identifying and treating those with risk of bone disease. The ancient, tested, natural herbal formulas of traditional Chinese medicine offer promise for treating the root causes of osteoporosis and bone disease, providing the body with a beneficial environment and conditions for maximizing bone health.

Reference