



## **Observing Our Menses: Women's Body Awareness and Chinese Medical Diagnosis**

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As women, we often have a very ambiguous relationship with our bodies. Not only does our society maintain unmeetable expectations regarding perpetual youth, beauty, and fitness, but even among ourselves we often maintain a culture of silence and shame around one of the most beautiful and powerful parts of who we are: our fertility and its manifestation in our menstrual cycle. Lack of self-knowledge around our menses may be cultural, but we are missing out not only on celebrating the magic of being a woman, but also an important connection to our health. By observing our menses we, as women, can discover valuable information about our bodies and our health, and we can work towards balance and vibrancy in our lives.

As a woman matures from her first period through to the perimenopausal years, her menstrual patterns develop a unique rhythm, her body adapting and responding to her hormonal fluxuations, her way of living, her mental and spiritual health, and her external environment. These adaptations and responses are reflected in a woman's menstrual cycle.

Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years ago, Chinese physicians recognized the importance of observing the menses and menstrual patterns to evaluate a woman's health, and to diagnose sources of physiological disharmony and imbalance. Ancient doctors of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) developed diagnostic and monitoring guidelines that are still deeply relevant and still profoundly effective. They are used today in both general diagnosis and in the practice of Chinese medical gynaecology.

So significant is a woman's cycle to a Chinese medical understanding her overall health, that during her visits to her TCM doctor she will be asked detailed questions about her menstrual patterns. This information about her body will help direct her treatment, whether it is for a specific gynaecological concern or for something unrelated to the menstrual cycle. Gynaecological information helps us understand

diverse complaints such as headaches, insomnia, digestive concerns, and, of course, many more.

Some of the diagnostically significant questions a TCM doctor will ask are questions some women may have never before stopped to ask themselves. For example, what is the colour of the blood, in the spectrum of black-to-fresh red-to-light pink? Is your menses thick or watery? Is there any 'clumping' or clotting? How long are your cycles? How many days do you menstruate? How do these patterns alter during stressful times? How heavy or light is the flow?

A TCM doctor may also ask a woman about her sensory experience associated with menstruation. Are there discomforts? What is the nature of her discomfort? When, where, and to what degree? Does she have nausea or vomiting? Does she have headaches or breast discomforts? Are there correlated emotional factors, and do these factors follow a pattern?

All of these questions have a specific diagnostic purpose. Over the centuries of observing women's cycles, TCM theorists developed an understanding of certain 'norms' around the menstrual cycle. These are not statistical norms, but rather the ideal norms of a healthy, balanced, harmonious body. How and when a woman deviates from these norms indicates an underlying pattern that requires interpretation.

One of the norms TCM theorists recognized was regarding cycle length.

The cycle length norm would be between 25 and 35 days, and the number of days menstruating would range between three to five days. In terms of flow, the normal range would be to need (using present day terminology) between three to five pads or tampons on a "heavy day". On a heavy day, anything beyond five pads can be very significant diagnostically. If your heaviest day requires two or fewer pads, that is equally significant.

Along with the amount of bleeding is the nature or quality of the menses itself. Our norm point would be a menses that is not too thick and sticky, or too watery. A normal period would have few clots or none at all. Ideally, the colour of menstrual blood is fresh red.

Many of our 'normal' sensory or emotional expectations do not reflect what the ancient Chinese doctors viewed as the norm. The TCM norm around pains or discomforts, cramping and achiness is minimal to

none at all. Similarly, the norm for premenstrual emotionality is equanimity. According to TCM theory, our emotions are in perfect relationship with our physical bodies: menstrual-related pain or irritability reflects an underlying physical imbalance.

Regarding sleep patterns and digestion, the norms reflect what we usually experience. That is, do we deviate during our cycle in any way from a consistent pattern? Regarding body temperature, the norm would be to feel comfortable, not hot or chilled.

These norms are, of course, only reference points. If a woman happens to feel somewhat emotional, or happens to experience moderate cramping during her period, this is probably 'normal' in the usual sense of the term. But all of this information, in addition to establishing a baseline from which to gauge improvement, helps guide a TCM doctor in making an accurate diagnosis, and formulating a personalized acupuncture or herbal prescription, as well as, perhaps, nutritional and lifestyle recommendations.

One of the beauties of TCM is the fact that it recognizes that each individual woman is a unique 'system' unto herself, interacting in her own unique way with her environment. TCM recognizes that each woman's menstrual cycle is a valuable, telling reflection of the degree of harmony in her internal and external worlds.