In our previous issue, we discussed the fundamental principles of how the different systems in our body work seamlessly together through the networks of meridian collateral systems. In this article, Dr Clement Ng will explore how TCM addresses different illnesses and diseases using the syndrome differentiation diagnostic and the concept of body constitution.

The concept of body constitution differentiation is widely used in the practice of TCM. Throughout its development, different methods of classification have been adopted: the yin-yang’s constitution classification, the 5-elements’ body constitution classification and body-syndrome classification, and the latest 9–body constitution classification developed by Professor Wang Qi from the Beijing University of TCM. These different classifications are indicative of the importance of constitutional consideration as a process in TCM clinical diagnosis and treatment, and in laying the foundation for health promotion and disease prevention through diet management.

Body constitution varies from person to person. Whether it’s inherited genes from our parents, nourishment, upbringing or other influences acquired from our environment – each of us is unique due to the different structural, physiological and psychological aspects we faced during our growth. The unique body constitution of a person determines how we live and behave, and our susceptibility to pathogens and disease development.

According to Professor Wang Qi, body constitution can be divided into nine types: neutral, Qi deficiency, yang deficiency, yin deficiency, blood stasis, phlegm and dampness, damp-heat, Qi stagnation and special constitution. Generally, body constitution affects an individual’s feel and behaviour, and how they respond to causes of illness. Undesirable health conditions and illnesses arise when the body becomes imbalanced.
The Nine Types Of Body Constitution

1. **Neutral**

Individuals have a strong physique, stable emotional or mental state and feel optimistic. They often have lustrous complexion and hair, bright eyes, proper senses of smell and taste, red and moist lips, resistance to fatigue, good sleep and appetite, normal bowel and urinary habits. They are adaptable to environmental changes.

*The Nutrition Diet recommendation:* Eat in moderation, always maintain a balanced diet and avoid foods that are too oily or spicy.

2. **Qi deficient**

Individuals tend to have flabby muscles, are introverted and timid in personality. They often have a feeble voice, shortness of breath, fatigue, catching cold or flu easily, sweating and teeth marks in the tongue margin. They are sensitive to environmental changes. Since these individuals are relatively weak in immune function, it usually takes a longer time for them to recover from illnesses.

*The Nutrition Diet recommendation:* Eat more foods that nourish Qi and the spleen function, and avoid foods that have a purging effect on body’s Qi.

3. **Yang deficient**

Individuals tend to have flabby muscles, are quiet and introverted in personality. They often complain about cold hands and feet, cold feeling in the stomach, are sensitive to low temperatures or noises, sleepiness, discomfort after eating cold foods, and a pale and bulky tongue. They often feel uncomfortable in windy, cold and humid environments. They are susceptible to health problems such as puffiness, diarrhoea and excess throat secretions.

*The Nutrition Diet recommendation:* Eat more foods that have warming characteristics. Eat less foods that are raw and considered cold in property.

4. **Yin deficient**

Individuals usually have a thin physique, are outgoing and impatient in personality. They like to complain about warm palms and soles, mouth dryness and dry nose. They have preference for cold drinks and often feel uncomfortable in hot and dry environments. They are susceptible to cough, fatigue, seminal emissions, dry stools, constipation, insomnia and some chronic conditions.

*The Nutrition Diet recommendation:* Eat more foods that are yin nourishing or help in generating fluids in the body. Eat less foods that have warming and/or diuretic properties.

5. **Phlegm and dampness**

Individuals are usually overweight and have a tummy. They are mild, and have steady and patient personalities. They often have an oily face, sticky or sweet taste in the mouth, excessive throat secretions, sweating, chest stuffiness, preference for sweet and greasy foods, and a thick tongue coating. They often feel uncomfortable in humid and rainy environments. They are susceptible to diabetes, metabolic syndrome or cardiovascular diseases.

*The Nutrition Diet recommendation:* Maintain a bland and balanced diet. Eat more foods that help improve urination and purge dampness from the body. Eat less foods that are sweet, stodgy and greasy.
6. Damp-heat

Individuals have either a normal or thin physique. They tend to be irritable and short-tempered. They often have an oily face that erupts with acne or pimples, a bitter or strong taste in the mouth, fatigue or heaviness of the body, a feeling of incompleteness after defecation, dry stools, yellow urine, excess vaginal discharge in females, wet scrotum in males, and a yellow and greasy tongue coating. They are sensitive to humid and hot environments especially in late summer or early autumn. They are susceptible to skin problems and urinary difficulties.

The Nutrition Diet recommendation: Eat more foods that help to cleanse heat and dampness from the body. Eat less foods that are heavy, astringent and oily.

7. Blood stasis

Individuals tend to be impatient and forgetful. They often have a dull complexion, spots on the face, dark-red lips, dark circles under eyes, lacklustre or rough skin, unknown bruises on the body surface, and varicose veins. They often feel uncomfortable in cold environments. They are susceptible to bleeding, painful conditions and abnormal growths.

The Nutrition Diet recommendation: Eat more foods that help promote blood circulation. Eat less foods that are oily in nature.

8. Qi stagnation

Individuals are mostly thin and tend to be emotionally unstable, melancholy or suspicious. They often have a depressed mood, are nervous, anxious, timid, sigh frequently and have heart palpitations. They respond relatively poorly to stressful situations, especially in winter, autumn and rainy days. They are susceptible to insomnia, depression, anxiety disorder and breast lumps.

The Nutrition Diet recommendation: Eat more foods that help disperse Qi, remove stagnation, improve digestion and provide calming effects.

9. Special or sensitive

Individuals usually have inborn weakness. They are very sensitive to drugs, foods, smells, pollen or other environmental allergens. They are prone to sneezing, runny nose, panting, and often develop nasal congestion, wheals, itchiness and even purple spots or patches under the skin. Common health problems among individuals are drug allergies, hay fever, eczema and asthma. They respond relatively poorly to external influences, and their health problems can easily be induced by seasonal changes.

The Nutrition Diet recommendation: Maintain a balanced diet. Avoid foods that may trigger the onset of the sensitivity. Eat less foods that are spicy or those considered to have stimulative effects, such as buckwheat, crab and prawns etc.

In reality, it is difficult for us to classify into one particular body constitution type, as a mixed type is likely to be presented. For example, yin deficiency and damp-heat; Qi deficiency and dampness; Qi stagnation and blood stasis. In such cases, you may want to consider consulting a TCM practitioner to give you a diagnosis to determine your individualised body constitution. This is similar to an annual health check report and will allow you to make informed decisions of what you should be eating for your next meal.

Your body constitution is not constant and unchangeable. Factors such as the environment we live in, our mental state, diet routine, daily activities and diseases can easily change the body’s condition. Taking control of your health according to the body constitution types is an important aspect of health maintenance and preservation principles of TCM.