

What does your tongue tell you?

This guide is a basic reference for participants of the 'Introduction to Chinese Tongue Diagnosis Workshop' with [Belfast Community Acupuncture](http://www.belfastcommunityacupuncture.com), Culture Night Belfast 2013.

Introduction to Chinese Medicine Diagnosis

Chinese Medicine Diagnosis is made by integrating a myriad of symptoms. Some of these symptoms may affect quality of life and have prompted making an appointment, and some may be little niggles. However, in Chinese Medicine one symptom on its own is meaningless until considered against many other symptoms which together form a more significant “pattern of disharmony” which your Chinese Medicine Practitioner will then go on to treat with acupuncture and/or another modality.

Why not just treat the presenting symptom?

The Chinese say, *Yi bing tong zhi. Tong bing yi zhi*, “Different diseases, same treatment. Same disease, different treatments.” In other words 10 patients with headaches will receive perhaps 10 different treatments according to the myriad of symptoms they present with, as a headache is but one symptom, the *biao* or branch of a more significant *ben* or root problem.

Why look at my tongue?

Most of the consultation will have been spent in discussion, taking a history and asking many questions. Tongue Diagnosis gives a cross reference against information given during the discussion. Your practitioner will already be forming a hypothesis on your main area of focus with regards to your presenting problem and overall health.

How do you assess the tongue?

First of all, don't worry. Everyone has signs of something on their tongue and by itself it is not a cause for concern. But it can be interesting to monitor over time, through stresses and illnesses, after certain foods and changes in habits, to see what your tongue tells you about your reactions to these factors. If you practice regularly, you can learn to view it as a barometer of your day-to-day health.

Having said that, as with all symptoms if you have any concerns then we recommend you *seek a medical evaluation*.

But if you are satisfied that you do not need to see your doctor, please continue reading to learn how to assess your tongue according to Chinese Medicine.

What does a normal tongue look like?



Signs: A clean moist, and even, thin coating through which the tongue body is visible. Fits the mouth comfortably. Pale pink in colour.

Indicates relative health, although remember this is a cross reference and does not rule out other symptoms

Size Matters

A normal tongue fits the mouth. An enlarged tongue appears flabby or enlarged, and may press on the teeth leaving 'scalloped' edges. In Chinese Medicine this indicates 'deficiency'. A deficiency may be of a substance (eg fluids or blood) or functional physiology (eg of metabolism, especially of fluids). Once fluids linger they can cause

further obstruction, a feeling of bloating after eating, a sense of unclear 'cloudiness' or 'fogginess' in the mind, lethargy, low mood etc. Here are a couple of examples:



Signs: A slightly enlarged tongue body, with a thick white coat, lack of mental clarity, bloated or feeling full, tired 'heavy' or aching limbs.

Indicates: sluggish metabolism and accumulation of fluids.

Advice: Acupuncture therapy to regulate metabolism and promote quality sleep. At home you can moderate diet to simple, partially cooked foods that are nourishing but easy to digest.



Signs: Enlarged, scalloped edges, pale colour, wet coating, fatigue, low mood, thinking/worrying, and spontaneous sweating.

Indicates 'qi deficiency'

Advice: Rebuild energy from ground up with a simple diet and light exercise such as yoga, tai chi and/or walking, swimming.

Colour indicators

The colour of the tongue body can indicate a spectrum of disorders. A pale tongue always indicates deficiency, and a red tongue body indicates heat, but this may be for a variety of reasons. Chinese Medicine talks about 'full heat' to indicate a strong immune reaction to a pathogen (fever) or 'empty heat' to indicate heat appearing in patients with a background of deficiency, such as seen in hot flushes during the peri-menopause. A red tip often appears with emotional upset. See the following examples.



Signs: Possible red edges, with red tip and strawberry spots. Prone to stress and tension, PMT, dysmenorrhoea, insomnia, irritability.

Indicates 'Stagnation of qi' and 'Shen disturbance'.

Advice: Minimise 'heating' foods eg caffeine, alcohol and chocolate. Ensure sufficient B12 in diet. Try lemon water in the morning, regular exercise and yoga/meditation. Acupuncture is particularly effective.



Signs: Red tongue with scanty coat and dry cracks. Menopausal symptoms eg hot flashes, insomnia, irritability, red flush on cheeks. May also follow chronic illness.

Indicates 'Yin deficiency'

Advice: Diet therapy, acupuncture to promote metabolism and restful sleep, calm mind and manage symptoms eg 'hot flashes'



Signs: Blue or purple tinge to the tongue body

Indicates: Stagnation of Blood due to variety of pathogenic influences

Advice: Blood pressure and cholesterol check, diet and lifestyle advice will be a key part of treatment.



Signs: Pale tongue body, loss of facial pallor, dull eyes, tiring easily, poor memory and concentration, numbness in extremities, short menstrual cycle and thin flow.

Indicates: Always indicates 'deficiency', often Blood (actual or borderline anaemia is possible)

Advice: Acupuncture for fatigue, metabolism,

Tongue Coating

Our final example in the basic Introduction to Tongue Diagnosis Workshop looks at tongue coating. Remember a normal coating should be evenly spread and you should be

able to see the tongue body through it. If the coat accumulates it indicates retention of fluids. We can already look at the ‘damp retention’ tongue in which thick white accumulations appear, and the yin deficiency tongue in which the coat is lacking (above). A further complication is when the body exhibits signs of ‘heat’



Signs: Thick greasy yellow tongue coating, red tongue body, emotional agitation, possible insomnia, possibly recurring urinary infections. Emotional irritability possible. Thirst, possible high blood sugar.

Indicates. ‘Heat’, either internal (disease) or external (eg viral). Often aggravated by coffee, tea, cola drinks and smoking and diet.

Advice. Acupuncture, diet therapy (minimise greasy foods eg pastries, saturated fats and minimise ‘heating’ foods eg alcohol, chillies, chocolate, caffeine). Have blood pressure and cholesterol checked.

Further Reading

We hope you enjoyed reading this basic introduction to Chinese Tongue Diagnosis. These are text book examples of tongues but in real life our individual “patterns of disharmony” are often multi-factored and so we may see some of these symptoms or a mixture of them. Over time we have learned to respect the art of Chinese Tongue Diagnosis as a valuable piece of the jigsaw puzzle.

There are many symptoms which manifest on the tongue and there are some excellent resources available on the internet if you wish to read a little more into it. Here are some sources we recommend.

Yin Yang House (well moderated site with lots of study material)

http://www.yinyanghouse.com/theory/chinese/tongue_diagnosis

Eagle Herbs: (Contains a fun interactive tongue diagnosis tool)

http://eagleherbs.com/self-tests/tongue-diagnosis-38?ap_id=bwb