

Traditional Chinese Medicine Alleviates Long COVID Symptoms: Pilot Study

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Introduction

As the world continues to grapple with the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, a growing subset of patients now face a lingering constellation of symptoms known as Long COVID, or Post-Acute Sequelae of SARS-CoV-2 infection (PASC). Characterized by fatigue, breathlessness, brain fog, palpitations, insomnia and musculoskeletal pain, Long COVID poses a complex challenge with no universally effective treatment. Conventional medicine often offers only symptomatic relief and many patients find themselves cycling through various therapies with limited improvement. In this context, Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) has emerged as a promising integrative approach, drawing on centuries of clinical experience in treating post-viral syndromes and systemic imbalances. A recent pilot study explores how individualized TCM treatments including herbal medicine, acupuncture and dietary adjustments can help alleviate Long COVID symptoms and restore physiological harmony. This analysis delves into the rationale, methodology and outcomes of the pilot study, highlighting TCM's potential in supporting recovery and resilience in the post-COVID landscape.

Description

Traditional Chinese Medicine operates on a fundamentally different model from biomedicine. Rather than targeting isolated symptoms or pathogens, TCM addresses underlying imbalances in Qi (vital energy), blood, yin-yang dynamics and organ function. Practitioners diagnose patients using a combination of pulse reading, tongue examination and detailed symptom inquiry to identify patterns such as Qi deficiency, dampness accumulation, heat toxicity, or blood stasis. This individualized approach is particularly well-suited to the heterogeneous and evolving symptom profile of Long COVID. In the pilot study conducted at a university-affiliated integrative health center in East Asia, 60 patients who met WHO criteria for Long COVID and had persistent symptoms for over 12 weeks were enrolled. The study followed a mixed-methods design over 8 weeks. Participants received twice-weekly acupuncture sessions targeting points associated with lung, heart, spleen and kidney meridians organs often implicated in post-viral fatigue and respiratory dysfunction. Additionally, a personalized herbal formula was prescribed, adjusted bi-weekly based on symptom evolution and practitioner assessment. Common herbs used included Huang Qi (*Astragalus membranaceus*) for immune support, Ban Xia (*Pinellia ternata*) for dampness and phlegm resolution and Dang Shen (*Codonopsis pilosula*) to tonify Qi and blood. Patients were also advised on

dietary and lifestyle modifications based on TCM principles, such as avoiding cold or raw foods and adopting a consistent sleep schedule to preserve kidney yin.

Outcome measures included the Fatigue Severity Scale (FSS), the Medical Outcomes Study Short Form (SF-36), heart rate variability (HRV) as a biomarker for autonomic function and semi-structured interviews to capture subjective improvements. By the end of the intervention, 72% of participants reported moderate to significant improvement in fatigue and mental clarity. FSS scores decreased by an average of 34%, while SF-36 scores improved in domains of energy, physical functioning and social engagement. Notably, HRV analysis showed increased parasympathetic activity, suggesting that TCM helped to rebalance the autonomic nervous system an important factor in Long COVID's neurophysiological manifestations. The study also documented specific symptom clusters that responded well to TCM. Patients experiencing persistent cough, chest tightness and shortness of breath showed significant improvement, likely due to the focus on restoring lung Qi and resolving phlegm. Those with neurological symptoms such as brain fog and insomnia benefitted from tonifying the heart and spleen and calming the Shen (spirit), a concept that encompasses mental-emotional health in TCM. Gastrointestinal symptoms such as bloating, poor appetite and diarrhea which often reflect spleen Qi deficiency and dampness accumulation also responded positively to herbal and dietary interventions [1].

One of the strengths of this pilot study lies in its patient-centered model. Rather than applying a uniform protocol, the TCM practitioners tailored treatments according to each individual's constitution and symptom pattern. This flexibility allowed for continuous adjustment and likely contributed to the high adherence and satisfaction rates among participants. Patients reported a strong sense of being heard, supported and empowered during their recovery, which contrasted with the often impersonal or dismissive experiences they had in conventional medical settings. However, the study also noted challenges. Standardizing outcome measures in TCM research remains difficult due to the subjective nature of pattern differentiation and the personalized nature of interventions. Moreover, placebo controls are inherently complex in acupuncture trials, though efforts were made to use validated sham points in a small control subgroup. Importantly, no serious adverse events were reported and the treatments were well-tolerated, supporting the safety profile of TCM in post-COVID care.

The implications of these findings extend beyond symptom relief. TCM offers a systems-level framework that addresses the root causes of post-viral dysfunction, including immune dysregulation, chronic inflammation and energetic depletion. By engaging both the physical and psycho-emotional aspects of healing, it supports whole-person recovery. These benefits align well with the needs of Long COVID patients, whose experiences often defy neat diagnostic categories and require multifaceted care. Globally, health systems are beginning to integrate TCM and other traditional modalities into pandemic recovery strategies. In China, herbal medicine protocols have been incorporated into official COVID-19 treatment guidelines since 2020. In Europe

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and North America, clinics are exploring integrative models that combine TCM with functional medicine, physiotherapy and mental health support. The pilot study contributes to this growing body of evidence, supporting the inclusion of TCM as a legitimate and effective component of Long COVID treatment programs [2].

Conclusion

The pilot study on Traditional Chinese Medicine for Long COVID offers compelling evidence that individualized TCM treatments can alleviate a wide range of persistent post-COVID symptoms, from fatigue and brain fog to respiratory and digestive complaints. By rebalancing Qi, tonifying deficient organ systems and harmonizing the body's internal environment, TCM provides a holistic, adaptable and patient-centered approach to post-viral recovery. While larger, controlled trials are needed to confirm efficacy and elucidate mechanisms, this preliminary research supports the integration of TCM into comprehensive care models for Long COVID. As we continue to navigate the long-term health consequences of the pandemic, embracing pluralistic, evidence-informed practices like TCM may be key to restoring health, resilience and hope for millions of affected individuals worldwide.

Acknowledgment

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Conflict of Interest

None.

References

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