

The Chinese Medical Treatment of Lipomas

by

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Lipomas are soft, movable, subcutaneous nodules with normal overlying skin. Patients may have one, several, or many lipomas. These benign fatty tumors occur more often in women than in men and appear most commonly on the trunk, back of the neck, and forearms. Since these tumors rarely become malignant, treatment is usually not required. However, if bothersome to the patient, they may be surgically excised or removed by liposuction. As it happens, one of my first patients many years ago came to me to try and treat a lipoma on their neck, and I failed to make a change in this tumor even after many acupuncture treatments. Therefore, the next year, I asked one of my teachers in China if there were any Chinese medical treatment for such fatty growths, and I remember being told that their only treatment was surgical excision. Based on this response, this is what I too have always said whenever asked by students or patients about these benign fatty growths. However, I recently came across an interesting article by Fang Li in the August 2001 issue of *Shan Xi Zhong Yi (Shanxi Chinese Medicine)* on page 26. Titled, "The Treatment of 22 Cases of Multiple Lipomas Via the Spleen," this article describes the author's internal medicinal treatment of lipomas using Chinese medicinals aimed at primarily the spleen. If the results of this author are to be believed, Dr. Fang has been able to achieve rather remarkable results in the medicinal elimination of multiple lipomas. While lipomas are not a serious medical condition, they are commonly seen and may be cosmetically disfiguring. Therefore, if there were a Chinese medical treatment for this condition, I believe there would be a group of Western patients who would be interested in knowing about and taking advantage of such a treatment.

Cohort description:

All the patients in this study had multiple lipomas. Of these 22, 12 were male and 10 were female. The youngest was 16 and the oldest was 52 years old. The shortest course of disease was one month and the longest was half a year. Five cases had lipomas on their upper extremities, three on their lower extremities, and 14 on their chest and abdomen. The smallest number of lipomas on a particular patient was five and the largest was 60. The diagnosis of multiple lipomas was based on criteria appearing in *Shi Yong Zhong Xi Yi Jie He Zhen Duan Zhi Liao Xue (A Study of Practical Integrated Chinese-Western Medical Diagnosis & Treatment)* published in Beijing in 1991 by the Chinese National Medicine & Medicinal Publishing Co. According to that source, the description or definition of lipomas is basically the same as given above in the introduction to this article.

Treatment method:

Internally administered Chinese medicinals consisted of: Pericarpium Citri Reticulatae (*Chen Pi*), 12g, processed Rhizoma Pinelliae Ternatae (*Ban Xia*), 12g, Radix Ligustici Wallichii (*Chuan Xiong*), 9g, Flos Carthami Tinctorii (*Hong Hua*), 15g, Bulbus Fritillariae Thunbergii (*Zhe Bei Mu*), 9g, Sclerotium Poriae Cocos (*Fu Ling*), 12g, Spica Prunellae Vulgaris (*Xia Ku Cao*), 30g, Radix Angelicae Sinensis (*Dang Gui*), 24g, Bombyx Batryticatus (*Jiang Can*), 12g, Folium Nelumbinis Nuciferae (*He Ye*), 9g, Rhizoma Coptidis Chinensis (*Huang Lian*), 9g, Radix Glycyrrhizae (*Gan Cao*), 9g, Bulbus Shancigu (*Shan Ci Gu*), 15g, uncooked Concha Ostreae (*Mu Li*), 15g. If the lipomas were on the upper extremities, nine grams each of Ramulus Mori Albi (*Sang Zhi*) and Rhizoma Curcumae Longae (*Jiang Huang*) were added. If the lipomas were on the lower extremities, 15 grams of Radix Achyranthis Bidentatae (*Niu Xi*) and 12 grams of Radix Angelicae Pubescentis (*Du Huo*) were added. If they were on the chest and/or abdomen, 12

grams of Radix Bupleuri (*Chai Hu*) and 15 grams of Fructus Meliae Toosendan (*Chuan Lian Zi*) were added. One *ji* was decocted in water and administered in two divided doses, morning and night, with one month equaling one course of treatment.

Treatment outcomes:

Cure was defined as complete disappearance of the tumors. Improvement was defined as partial receding or shrinking of the tumors with disappearance of any accompanying symptoms. No effect meant that there was no improvement in the tumors. Based on these criteria, 20 cases were cured. Ten of these were cured in one course of treatment, six were treated in two courses, and four were treated in three courses. The other two cases which were not cured were judged improved. Thus the cure rate was 90.9% and the total amelioration rate was 100%.

Discussion:

According to Dr. Fang, lipomas are categorized as *rou liu*, “meaty tumors,” in Chinese medicine and are mostly due to spleen vacuity losing control over movement and transformation. Hence phlegm and dampness are engendered internally which then lead to qi stagnation and blood stasis locally. Although Dr. Fang does not say so, it is probably useful to remember, “The spleen is the root of phlegm engenderment.” Therefore, Dr. Fang believes that this condition should mainly be treated via the spleen, assisted by rectifying the qi and loosening the center, opening depression and transforming phlegm. Within this formula, *Chen Pi*, *Ban Xia*, *Fu Ling*, and *He Ye* supplement the spleen and boost the stomach, loosen the center

and rectify the qi. *Zhe Bei Mu*, *Xia Ku Cao*, *Shan Ci Gu*, and uncooked *Mu Li* soften the hard and scatter nodulation. *Dang Gui*, *Chuan Xiong*, and *Hong Hua* quicken the blood, free the flow of the network vessels, and scatter nodulation, and *Jiang Can* strengthens the function of transforming phlegm and freeing the flow of the network vessels.

That being said, I believe that readers should note that none of the patients in this study had had lipomas for very long. In fact, the longest period of time was only half a year. Recently, one of my dogs had a lipoma biopsied and one of the things I learned from the veterinarian is that lipomatous cells do not metabolize at a steady rate. Sometimes they are quite active and other times they are quite inactive. In other words, Dr. Fang’s success rate may have had something to do with how long these patients had had lipomas and not just with the functions and indications of the medicinals he used. Based on my own experience with lipomas, my guess is that Dr. Fang’s success rate would have gone significantly down the longer the patient had had their lipomas which had achieved a steady state. It would be interesting to know if the two patients who only improved were those who had had their lipomas the longest period of time. Unfortunately, Dr. Fang does not break down his results in this way.

Of the medicinals used by Dr. Fang, all are readily available in the U.S. except *Shan Ci Gu*. One potential substitution might be *Rhizoma Dioscoreae Bulbiferae* (*Huang Yao Zi*).

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