Introduction

Due to societal pressures and the busy lives we lead, Blood deficiency is a very common pattern we see with clients at Six Degrees. Blood deficiency is important to us because it causes an array of minor and major health problems. Also, many options to remedy Blood deficiency are available and it can be helpful to know there is much we can do to make this better. We hope the following can provide some information and support. The causes and symptoms of Blood deficiency can vary quite a bit, and each person manifests health patterns differently. This can be confusing. Here are a few details on Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) and how your acupuncturist looks at illness.

Blood deficiency is not seen as a disease but a health pattern. A health pattern is a way of describing an imbalance we may have that results in a person not feeling or being healthy. TCM understands that we are healthy or not healthy based on many factors including diet, lifestyle, sleep, stress, work, etc. As we are all made up differently and lead different lives, health patterns will vary. Person ‘A’ won’t have the same symptomology as Person ‘B’. Taking these factors into consideration, an acupuncturist or TCM practitioner will determine where the imbalance lies, how it is affecting the energy/organ system, and suggest ways to bring it back into balance.

Blood in TCM

From a TCM perspective, Blood does more than run through our veins and oxygenate cells. It ensures we have nourishment and moisture for the entire body. Blood keeps our tendons, skin and hair healthy, strong and flexible. It lubricates joints and allows for smooth movement.

Blood also nourishes the mind and is considered the material basis for mental activity. Strong Blood ensures good sleep and helps us wake feeling rested. It keeps us calm. Our mind is nourished so we can remember things easily and feel more grounded in our thoughts. The overall feeling of having strong Blood feels like we are together, that we have strength and vitality to take on the day and have a clear mind. Our reactions, focus and memory are sharp.

Strong Blood helps us feel like ourselves and is the basis of sensation and groundedness. It provides sensation to the limbs, skin and muscles. We feel vital. We feel stable in mind and are well grounded in our physicality. We don’t get stressed out as much. There’s a sense of solidity that helps us feel our physical, mental and emotional borders. In a sense, we know our boundaries: who we are, where we begin, where we end, and what we are responsible for.

How Blood is produced and stored

The physiology of Blood differs from what you may be used to. In TCM, the Spleen’s function is often described as a pot, cooking the food with digestive fire. Food is received and ripened by the stomach and then transformed by the Spleen into nutritive Qi (food essence). From there, it is sent up to the Lungs where it is combined with air. Here, the Lungs and Heart transform nutritive Qi and air into Blood, which is then circulated throughout the body. It is then stored in the Liver and sent out when it is needed for activity.
Some causes of Blood deficiency

Diet and eating habits

Food is what forms Blood, and issues around food and eating are common causes of Blood deficiency. To produce Blood you need to eat Blood-building foods. Many vegan, vegetarian or low-fat diets lack Blood-building foods* and are often supplemented poorly. Over consumption of meat also inhibits the Spleen’s function. You also need to eat enough food. Restrictive diets and fasting deplete us of Blood.

Damp or cold foods* inhibit the Spleen’s transforming function. When we consume too many damp or cold foods, it’s like throwing wet leaves on the digestive fire. It slows down and clogs up the Spleen. As a result, the Spleen produces less Blood.

How we eat affects the quality of our Blood. Eating too much at once, eating too quickly, irregular eating, eating on the run, eating while working or eating before bed impair the Spleen’s ability to transform and make Blood.

*See ‘What to eat’ for a list of dampening and Blood-building foods

Worry, anxiety and overthinking

The Spleen is the primary organ of Blood production in TCM. It is also the organ most affected by worry, overthinking and anxiety. Constant multitasking, detailed mental work like grant writing, office or school work, lingering worries, anxiety or psychological traumas all impact the Spleen’s ability to transform food into Blood. These states can also lead to a poor appetite further complicating the cycle.

Excessive work

Physical and mental work consumes Qi but also Blood. When we rest the Liver stores Blood and sends it out when we need it. When Blood is in deficit and we're pushing ourselves, we are literally using up the reserve. Muscles and tendons do not get nourished because the Blood is not there. Numbness and frequent sprains, body aches and fatigue can result. In this state we are also more vulnerable to injury.

Blood loss/trauma

Heavy menstruation, childbirth, internal bleeding, and Blood loss through physical trauma all contribute to Blood deficiency.

Holding in emotions

The Liver is responsible for supplying Qi or energy to the Spleen. It is also susceptible to anger and tends to stagnate when our expression is blocked. When the Liver is stuck and can't support the Spleen, Blood deficiency results.

Excess drinking or drug use

Excess drinking or drug use weakens the ability of the Liver to store Blood and creates Damp in the Spleen.

Potential signs of Blood deficiency

Strong Blood nourishes our skin, hair, muscles and tendons. It roots our mind and grounds our sensations and emotions. It keeps our memory and responses sharp. The following are potential markers of Blood deficiency.

• Pale lips, nails, tongue, face; dry facial skin and dry skin; hair falling out; floaters in eyes;
  body aches: numbness and weak tendons that are easily injured
• Dizziness, poor memory, difficulty focusing, depression, anxiety, difficulty relaxing,
  easily stressed, difficulty falling and/or staying asleep, a feeling of floating and
  disembodiment
• Lack of strength, upper body tension, really heavy periods or light periods,
  headaches, migraines

* These symptoms will range in intensity. You also do not need all of these symptoms in order to have some degree of Blood deficiency.
What this looks like all together - case studies

A common case study at Six Degrees is a client who has a habit of not caring for themselves as much as they care for others- someone who is always extending their efforts and energy to others while they deplete their own energy and resources. When this happens it trickles into many aspects of their lives. For example, a community worker & activist who works with many people, who eats on the go or frequently misses meals, often has headaches, period pain or irregularities, and fibroids. Her sleeping habits are irregular; she has insomnia or restless sleep. Rarely does she feel rested upon waking. Often, she struggles with states of scatteredness, has difficulty with concentration and focus, and has a poor short-term memory.

A specific example

A woman, age 28, came in for neck pain caused by a diagnosed cervical degeneration. She also has a history of anorexia, poor eating habits, anxiety and panic attacks. Using an intrauterine device for two years had caused severe menstrual cramps and heavy Blood loss. She was pale, had weak nails, a poor memory and fatigue, especially around and during menstruation. Her period is light.

The treatment involved keeping a food diary, making dietary changes, deep relaxation, stress reduction, and acupuncture once a week for 10 weeks.

We use the same series of acupuncture points each week to build Blood. The food diary begins to foster awareness of food choices. We ensure she is getting Blood building foods and regular meal times.

After 10 weeks she feels stronger and her period is heavier. She is more clear headed, remembering more and experiencing less anxiety. Her neck pain has decreased significantly. She now comes once a month or during high periods of stress.

Blood deficiency in cis-gendered men and women

Blood deficiency in cis-gendered* men is often seen more in the tongue and pulse. It may manifest as restless legs, dry lips, dry skin, etc. There is no monthly period, so we cannot monitor the Blood balance with the person's monthly experience of having a period. Instead, we take information from what the client says, feel the pulse and look at the tongue.

In cis-gendered women it is often easier to assess Blood deficiency because each month there is a release of Blood, and the quality, the quantity and the person's experience of the period all contain information we can use to identify a degree of Blood deficiency.

* cisgender. cis = on the same side; meaning one's sex generally meets with one's gender

Blood deficiency in a trans context

Blood deficiency in trans people has the same symptomology and similar causes. We use the same diagnostic skills with an additional history of what life was like before transitioning.

We ask about what their periods were like before taking T. This gives us a picture of how this person's state of Blood was before transition. We then use observation, questioning, tongue and pulse to confirm diagnosis. For trans-women, we also ask what their skin and hair were like before E, how they slept, and how it may have changed since taking E.

Taking T and E may affect digestion, mood and energy flow in the body. The effects of these are taken into consideration and included in diagnosis.
Blood deficiency in a social context

At work we spend long hours that demand our attention and energy to go beyond their healthy limits. We skip meals, eat badly and push our mind and body to the edge to get done what has to be done.

TCM understands that we are a part of the environment we live in and that our body experience is not limited to just our bodies, but includes our interactions with the world around us.

Someone who is Blood deficient may have a habit of not caring for themselves as much as they care about others. Someone who is always giving out to others often has an imbalance in giving back to themselves. When this happens it trickles into many aspects of life.

In a grand context, this is a big problem and there is a lack of nourishment for many marginalized and oppressed peoples in this world today. Still, we must work together to see that if we do not nourish ourselves we cannot and will not be able to keep nourishing others. If we are working long hours, 5-6 days a week over the course of 10 years, we have to balance work with good lunch breaks, good vacations, and regular attention to self-care throughout the week in order to balance the intensity and amount of the work we do.

Self care

Blood deficiency is a health pattern and patterns can be changed. We’ve seen many people at Six Degrees do this. Here are some ways we can take care of ourselves.

How to eat

Understand that food is both a pleasure and a fuel and treat it as such. Overeating, eating too fast, preoccupations while eating, or eating at irregular times create stress on the Spleen. You can support your Spleen by:

* Enjoying your food
* Eating slower
* Eating until you’re about 80% full
* Eating a variety of foods

* Having regular meals in a calm environment
* Eating away from stresses or distractions
* Planning meals

What to eat

Try to keep a balance – ensure not to eat too much of any one food. Too much meat will weaken the Spleen and we will be unable to digest what we eat. Too many grains can create dampness. Variety and balance are key.

Try to include whole grains and vegetables: streamed, in soup, baked or lightly sautéed, twice a day.

Good quality sources of protein: beans, eggs or meat

Avoid foods that are cold, raw or damp.

Increase foods that are warm, build Blood and support the Spleen.

Foods and supplements that build Blood:

Eggs   Beef
Seeds and nuts   Beets
Leafy greens   Oatmeal
Nutritional yeast   B12
Iron (taken with vitamin C for better absorption)

Chicken   Liver/pate
Pumpkin   Sweet potato
Brown rice   Quinoa
Spirulina/blue green algae

Sea vegetables
Carrots
Beans (combined with a grain)

Damp foods in excess

Alcohol   Dairy products
Tofu   soymilk
Refined carbohydrates (sugar, white floor)

Greasy, heavy or oily foods

Cold foods

Cold foods: iced drinks, beer, ice cream
Raw fruits and vegetables

*Set up an appointment with your acupuncturist to work out some personal dietary guidelines
What to do

Activities that relax and calm

- Meditation
- Gentle yoga (kundalini, restorative, or yin)
- Tai chi or Qi Gong
- Cooking
- Reading
- Walking
- Whatever works for you…

Ease your mind

If anxiety and depression are persisting, consider seeking out a competent counselor, support group or psychotherapist.

Express yourself

Get your Liver Qi moving. Find healthy ways to express anger. Learn to express what you need.

Work less

Look at your workload and do your best to make it a realistic one. Set boundaries and limits for yourself. Work less and work smarter.

Use fewer drugs or less alcohol

Do your best to sleep well

Set a bedtime for yourself. Make bedtime a ritual. Use your bed for sleeping not working, reading or studying. Wake up at regular times.

Other help

Regular acupuncture appointments

With acupuncture, we use points to tonify Spleen function so that we are getting the most out of our food in order to build Blood. We also use points to improve the quality of sleep so that our body is better able to store Blood. We work to calm the whole system down so that it can function more harmoniously.

Shiatsu

Shiatsu is good for Blood deficiency because it is comforting and relaxing. It also strengthens the Spleen, opens the meridians and moves stagnant Liver Qi.

Resources

- ‘Healing with Whole Foods’ by Paul Pitchford
- ‘Chinese Medicine for Maximum Immunity’ by Jason Elias and Katherine Ketcham
- [www.shen-nonq.com](http://www.shen-nonq.com)

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