6 Evils of TCM: Ancient theory for assessing imbalance

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For many centuries, the theory of the Six Evils in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) has served as a diagnostic tool of sorts to determine the source of imbalance.

No, the Six Evils aren’t scary monsters under your bed. However, these external influences or forces can quickly strike you down. They won’t necessarily make you sick every time. But if your body, mind, or spirit is not in balance, one or more of these six evils can cause serious disharmony.

During the epoch when the Six Evils evolved, over 2000 years ago, EMFs (Electromagnetic fields), artificial food-dyes, and spending too much time staring at screens, and other modern potential homeostasis disruptors didn’t exist. But even in today’s connected hyperactive modern society, the Six Evils remains a very accurate way of finding the root cause of many environmentally-caused pathogens.

The Six Evils takes into account the seasons and weather, a person’s constitution (for example, the Five Elements), location, occupation and diet, among other holistic markers.

No doubt you are familiar with how “evil” a nasty cold or flu can be. In addition, you probably know all too well unexplainable nagging, throbbing headaches or shooting pain. But what is it that causes these imbalances? Let’s now take a look at the Six Evils:

6 Evils #1: WIND EVIL

Going outside on a windy day isn’t necessarily a guarantee you’ll get sick, but there’s a good reason mom always tells you to bring a jacket. It turns out mom is right; wind attacks the skin pores and leaves us vulnerable to a weakened state of immunity. If you have lots of stress (including eating a bad diet, drinking too much alcohol or soda, etc.), and experience a wind invasion, a sudden illness can manifest.

That’s because when our pores open up during a wind invasion, we become vulnerable to the other external evils. A wind invasion opens the door for other evils. For example, a bad cold is a virus according to western medicine, but in TCM theory, the body is out of balance because of a cold wind invasion.

Which brings us to our next external cause of illness….

6 Evils #2: COLD EVIL

An itchy throat, nasal discharge and headache are all signs of a cold evil that piggybacks off of the wind invasion. An illness from a wind invasion is likely to result in sweating. This makes sense because wind opens up the pores, which makes it easier to sweat, which is a good thing because it’s helping to expel the wind invasion. However, sweating also makes it possible for other important fluids to be lost and for another evil to invade, such as cold.

Have you ever got a stiff neck for no apparent reason? Blame it on cold and wind evils combining forces. In addition to stiffness, symptoms of cold invasion include chills, coughing and paleness (but no sweating, in the case of a cold-wind invasion). Cold evil constricts the flow of blood and results in blood stagnation. Blood stagnation can result in pain, especially in the lower body.

The TCM concept of the Six Evils, as you may understand by now, has its roots in daily observation and common sense thinking. Obviously, one is more prone to a cold-wind invasion in the late winter or early spring months.

But as much common sense as it makes, the Six Evils applies to very complicated pathogenic disturbances that may not be so obvious to discern.

[These all-natural herbs may help prevent or alleviate common cold symptoms.]

Moving on then to the next evil….

6 Evils #3: HEAT EVIL

Spend too much time at the beach, roasting your skin under the warm, dry sun? You may be susceptible to a heat invasion. As you’d expect, you’re more vulnerable to heat invasion during the hot, summer months. Heat evil is dry in nature. An invasion of heat (aka, fire) invigorates the blood, albeit too quickly. Heat invasion “cooks” the blood. Your pulse becomes rapid.

Your skin, especially your face can get (rather embarrassingly) tomato red. You can develop a fever and have an insatiable thirst for a cold beverage.

Getting back to the common cold, when a wind invasion combines with a heat invasion, you get a nasty sore throat with yellowish-greenish phlegm.

According to TCM theory, heat evil disrupts body fluids and can cause mental disharmony. (Get lost wandering in the desert in July and you’ll see how quickly your mental acuity will suffer!). This is when your “chill, relaxed” yin energy becomes unhinged and disturbed.

But a heat evil isn’t the only invasion that can cause you to get ‘hot-headed’….

6 Evils #4: SUMMER HEAT EVIL

Unlike regular heat, which is dry in nature, Summer Heat evil relates to hot, damp, humid, languid conditions. There’s no mystery what happens when you’re exposed for too long to hot, damp weather. You sweat profusely, you can’t seem to drink enough fluids, you can become nauseous and vomit, and both mentally and physically, you can be very squirmy, tossing and turning while trying to sleep or concentrate. This evil can dehydrate the body and cause greater imbalances.

The next evil relates to general ‘swampy’ conditions that do not arise during the late summer.

6 Evils #5: DAMP EVIL

Wind, cold and dampness can attack the joints. Anybody who has arthritis will tell you how evil dampness is. Dampness makes things swollen. There are also internal causes of dampness such as poor diet (eating fatty, greasy food). Damp evil makes things seem heavier. Dampness tends to magnify how we relate to weather (hot weather feels hotter; cold on our skin feels colder). Damp evil also hinders Qi. This can manifest as poor digestion during a damp invasion.

Let’s take a look at the next evil, which is on the opposite side of the invasion spectrum….

6 Evils #6: DRY EVIL

In TCM theory, autumn is the time of year that you’re most likely vulnerable to a dry invasion. Going to the desert in early autumn (when it still feels like summer) and being stuck in a sandstorm is an extreme dry evil. The skin becomes cracked, the lungs become wheezy, an insatiable thirst develops, etc…

The treatment for dry evil involves taking herbs that bring the body back into balance (and/or acupuncture). In the case of dry evil, TCM herbs that have damp characteristics would be the treatment protocol.

Again, this is a simplistic view of the 6 Evils in TCM. Acupuncturists and Chinese herbalists even in the 21st century continue to use this ancient diagnostic paradigm.