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Fall 2007

Volume 4 Issue 3

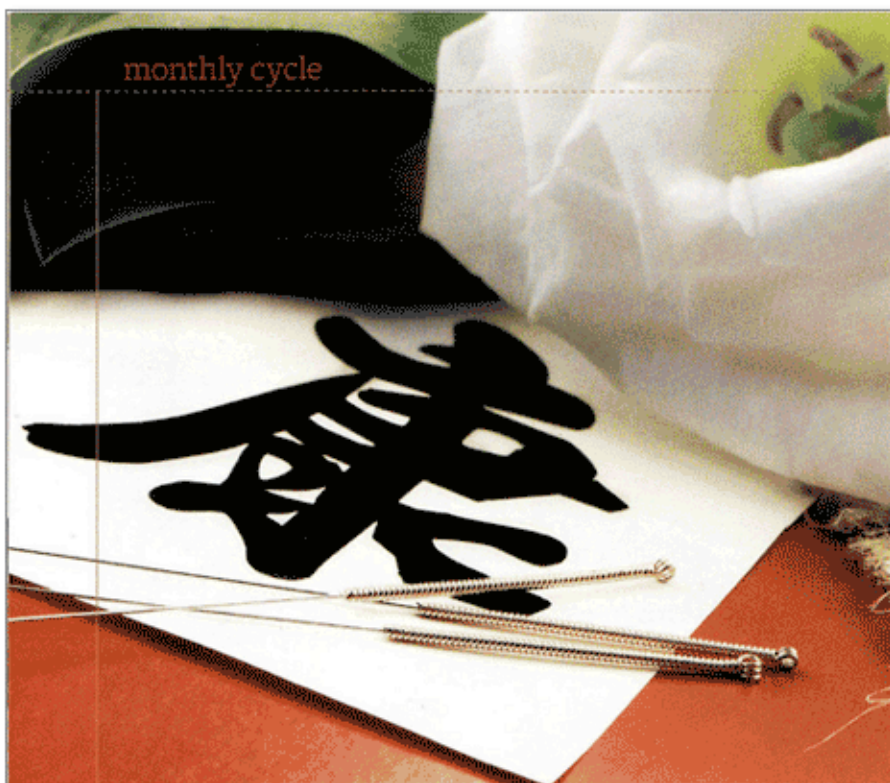
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monthly cycle



# cycling chinese style

Think you know everything about your menstrual cycle? Take a look from another perspective. A leading acupuncturist and practitioner of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) explains the map of the monthly cycle according to this Eastern science. *By Jill Blakeway*

The Western perspective on the monthly cycle is the one most of us are familiar with, but it's not the only one. Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) has its own take on menstruation and motherhood. Read this week-by-week description of the reproductive cycle according to TCM:

## week one: menstruation

Estrogen and progesterone levels fall, which signals the hypothalamus to release a hormone that triggers the uterus to shed its lining. Bleeding begins.

**The TCM perspective:** Yin and yang are opposing forces in the body that need to be in balance for good health. All things contain these two forces. While difficult

to describe, yin is considered nourishing, moistening, and cooling, while yang is energizing, motivating, and warming. At its most extreme, yin can transform to yang or vice versa.

Day one of the menstrual cycle is the point when the luteal phase (the second half of the menstrual cycle, following ovulation) which is yang, changes to menstruation, which is yin. In other words, it's the point when yang transforms to yin.

In Chinese medicine, the quantity and quality of blood flow during menstruation is an important indicator of reproductive health. For instance, blood clots can indicate a disruption in the flow of "qi" (energy), which may indicate a barrier to

fertility. Cramps, not usually a concern in the West, are a sign in Chinese medicine that blood flow is obstructed.

### TCM practitioner may suggest:

- Acupuncture to influence hormonal pathways and balance the endocrine system, stimulating blood flow to ease cramps, prevent clots, build qi, and aid follicle development.
- An herb such as Dang Gui to smooth the flow of blood.

## week two: preparing to ovulate

The endometrial lining thickens as follicles develop in the ovaries. By day 10, one of the follicles will have become dominant, producing a ripened egg. When estrogen levels peak around day 12, the body gets the message to produce luteinizing hormone (LH). This hormone will signal the lead follicle to rupture and release an egg.

**The TCM perspective:** As a woman nears ovulation, her cycle, which has been dominated by nourishing yin energy, becomes more yang. In patients with a long follicular phase, a practitioner will decide if this is due to lack of yin slowing down the production of follicles, or lack of yang, meaning that ovulation is delayed. The quality of yin is thought to have an effect on the quality of the egg.

### TCM practitioner may suggest:

- Herbs called a "yin tonic," because in Chinese medicine the process of building follicles needs yin and blood.
- An over-the-counter herbal remedy called Liu Wei Di Huang Wan to supplement yin and encourage follicle growth. Other herbal remedies can increase vaginal mucus and regulate hormones.
- An acupuncture treatment as close to ovulation as possible if the slow transformation (of yin to yang) is due to qi not flowing smoothly. Acupuncture can facilitate the smooth release of an egg.

## week three: fertilization and implantation

After ovulation, the levels of luteinizing and follicle-stimulating hormones (FSH) immediately drop, and the follicle that produced the egg becomes a cyst called the corpus luteum, which produces progesterone. This part of the cycle is called the luteal phase (see week one), and needs to last for at least 10

days, allowing sufficient time for implantation if an egg is fertilized.

**The TCM perspective:**

Women are warmer in their luteal phase, and Chinese medicine stresses the importance of a warm uterus for implantation. Yang is what warms the body, and when temperatures rise, women are more likely to get pregnant.

**TCM practitioner may suggest:**

- Yang tonics for patients who have a low basal body temperature in the luteal phase to stimulate the body to produce more progesterone.
- Other herbs to shorten the luteal phase or maintain a higher body temperature.
- An over-the-counter herbal formula called Ba Zhen Tang to boost qi.
- An acupuncture treatment to aid implantation and maintain progesterone levels.

**week four:  
a developing embryo or  
the premenstrual phase**

If fertilization has occurred, the embryo

arrives in the uterus to implant. The body then produces hCG (human chorionic gonadotropin), which prevents the uterine lining from shedding and keeps the corpus luteum going, producing progesterone to maintain the pregnancy.

If fertilization has not occurred, the corpus luteum begins to degenerate. At that moment, estrogen and progesterone levels fall, and the hypothalamus is prompted to trigger the release of GnRH (gonadotropin-releasing hormone) and FSH. These hormones start the menstrual flow, and the cycle begins again.

**The TCM perspective:**

Implantation depends on several factors in Chinese medicine, including good blood flow to the uterus, and a good quality endometrium free from obstruction.

After implantation, the uterus presses its front and back walls together to hold the embryo in place. To achieve this, the body removes fluid from the uterine cavity by way of the endometrial cells, which

absorb fluid. This is known as pincytosis. In Chinese medicine, if there is a disruption to the fluid metabolism, the endometrium will be too slippery for an embryo to remain implanted. If you're not pregnant and suffer from PMS (premenstrual syndrome), this is seen as a sign of imbalance.

**TCM practitioner may suggest:**

- Herbs to combat problems with fluid metabolism.
- A simple Chinese herbal formula called Xiao Yao Wan, taken the week before the period, to relieve PMS symptoms.
- Acupuncture to regulate the subtle hormone imbalances that are prevalent at this time. ☸

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