

# Springtime is Liver Time in Chinese Medicine

By [Conan Milner, Epoch Times](#) | April 30, 2014  
Last Updated: April 30, 2014 11:06 am



## Adaptation, Spring, and the Wood Element in Chinese Medicine

In traditional Chinese medicine, optimum health is maintained by nourishing different organs during different seasons.

In the spring, when green shoots emerge from the previously frozen ground and buds return to the trees, it's time to consider your liver.

Chinese medicine's ideas about organ function are complex and extend beyond the organs' chemical activities. Nevertheless, the rules are clear. According to the *Nei Jing*, a foundational treatise on wellness and disease from ancient China, "Those who disobey the laws of spring will be punished with an injury to the liver."

So what are the "laws of spring?" Think leadership, growth, and an easy spirit.

## Spring Leader

In many ancient cultures, spring represents a new beginning—a time for cleansing and renewal that sets the rest of the year in motion. In Chinese medicine, the liver also takes on a decisive leadership role, like that of an army general who directs forces throughout the body.

Ideally, this liver general is levelheaded—responding appropriately to changes and promoting balance, growth, and a free flow of energy throughout the body.

"The general makes the decisions about where we're going to put our energy," said Mary Rogel, Ph.D., acupuncturist and herbalist in Chicago, and editor of the *Oriental Medicine Journal*. "The energy comes from elsewhere, but it's the liver, the general, that decides when to use it, where to use it, and how much to use."

A sick or sluggish general brings chaos: the troops lack direction, stagnation and frustration result. In Chinese medicine a stagnant liver can cause problems anywhere in the body and lead to a wide range of symptoms like swollen or inflamed joints, tight muscles, poor digestion, hormonal imbalance, and skin eruptions.

For some of her patients, Rogel says that she has to address liver problems before she can do anything else.

“Sometimes there are patients who come in where everything hurts—you can barely touch the person, and it’s really hard to start to treat them,” she said. “Those people in my experience all have liver imbalance, and once I get the liver imbalance taken care of, then I can go in and treat them just like any other patient.”

A difficult menopause also demonstrates the liver’s critical leadership role. Every woman’s hormonal production naturally wanes with age, but for some the transition is rough. According to Rogel, when a competent general can adjust the body to hormonal changes, symptoms disappear.

“If you go in there and clean up the liver the menopausal symptoms go away, and you don’t have to do anything to the hormones,” she said. “You don’t have to take the approach that Western medicine does of replacing hormones, all you need to do is clean up the mess so the liver can take care of things.”

## **General Care**

Modern medicine views the liver as a filter—sifting through blood, metabolizing hormones, toxins, and dead viruses; separating the useful from the problems.

Various herbal medicine traditions aim to clean this filter with green and sour plants. Curiously enough, these plants tend to grow in the spring.

“It’s like nature is telling us it’s time to do some cleaning,” Rogel said. “Clean out all that debris from sitting around all winter and eating all those heavy foods, and get things moving again.”

Sour greens like dandelion and yellow dock are time-honored liver remedies used throughout the world. The much more pronounced sour notes of rhubarb, lemon, and vinegar serve a similar purpose. There’s something about that tart taste that helps the general clear his head.

## Easy Spirit

The liver is a leader, but since the body is always changing, the general can't afford to be too rigid. If our ambition is not tempered by springtime's easy vibe, problems can surface.

Between the extremes of winter and summer, spring has a more relaxed spirit, and so do we when we have a healthy liver.

But when our path gets blocked, things don't go the way we want them to, our anger flares up, and it can negatively affect the liver. According to Chinese medicine, the liver is particularly sensitive to this emotion, and intense or prolonged rage can damage it.

Resentment, frustration, or feeling stuck can also build up liver stagnation over time. According to Rogel, some patients can trace health problems back to a single angry outburst.

Other things that harm the liver include alcohol, toxic chemical exposure, hydrogenated oil and other poor quality fats, excess sugar, and drug use.

To keep the liver general in top form you should eat plenty of green vegetables, drink lemon water, and add turmeric root into your cooking. For a specific remedy for liver imbalance, visit your local acupuncturist or herbalist.