The Cold/Depression Tissue State

The cold/depression tissue state is that which is opposite to the heat/excitation tissue state- the latter being marked by an excessive amount of activity, metabolism, and irritation in the tissues. Being the opposite to this, the cold/depression tissue state is one where the overall metabolic purpose of the tissues is lowered, decreasing its functional capacity, responsiveness to the surrounding environment, and its overall activity.

As with all of the tissue states, I always place a great deal of importance on the second word that describes it. I find it interesting that oftentimes these are words used to describe particular psychological states. Thus, if you think of the overall psychological dynamic around depression and how it feels, you can then translate that overall feeling into a particular organ system or tissue and really start to get a good sense for how it is afflicted.

Some of the common complaints amongst people that are depressed are words such as: heavy, tired, fatigued, sluggish, uninspired, lacking motivation, fogginess and lack of clarity, and just simply not wanting to do much of anything. When a tissue or organ has cold/depression, this is essentially what is going on. The tissue is unresponsive to stimulation, it is underactive in its functioning, meaning that it is not doing its job efficiently, effectively, or at all when the tissue state is in an extreme place. This ultimately leads to tissue death, necrosis, and complete loss of organ function. Pretty serious stuff.

When there is such a diminished amount of cellular activity within the tissues, there is a much greater predisposition for invasion from various pathogenic lifeforms, such as parasites, bacteria, and viruses. This correlation can be two-fold: on the one hand cold/depression tissue state makes one more vulnerable to these foreign invaders, and on the other infection from these types of pathogens can cause this tissue state. Either way, cold/depression makes one much more predisposed to a wide variety of infections, thus stimulating the immune system, potential formation of pus, abscesses, and on a much deeper level blood poisoning or septicemia. This tends to stagnate the blood, lymphatics, and congest the channels of elimination. While in the beginning there may be acute stimulation of the immune system, when it occurs over the long term there can be lowered systemic immunity, making serious conditions like cancer more prone.

Depressed cellular activity indicates a lack of nutrition and oxygen to the tissues and impedes circulation, often resulting in overall lowered energy levels, brain fog, fatigue, and a sense of heaviness and stagnation both in the mind and body. This is ultimately the result of “congealed blood” or poor peripheral circulation, of which the hallmark sign is cold hands and feet. While this is not serious condition unto itself, it is often a pretty clear indicator that there is a presence of cold in the system. One great way to determine this is to feel the patients arm gradually moving down to the hands. If it progressively gets colder as you approach the hands then it is true cold- lack of heat in the core radiating out to the periphery. If it suddenly gets cold, then it is an indication of tension, which we will discuss in a future lesson.

Some of the general signs and symptoms of this tissue state include overall sensations and signs of coldness, such as pale skin, cold extremities (especially hands and feet), sluggish organ functions, sensations of heaviness, tiredness and fatigue, brain fog, hypothyroidism,
Constitutions: Cold/Depression

weight gain, difficulty throwing off waste products, slowness in movements, and pain sensations that are dull and radiating as opposed to sharp. While paleness is a very common sign of cold/depression reflected onto the skin, it is also common to see purple to bluish discoloration in the veins or capillary beds, as well as potentially on the tongue. In its most extreme manifestation black coloration can show. The tongue will typically be pale in color and any coating on the tongue will usually be thick and white. The pulse is typical low/deep, slow, weak, and/or obscured, but it can become rapid and nonresistant if fever sets in from bacterial overgrowth or something like that.

One of the best (or worse, depending on how you look at it) examples of the cold/depression tissue state is the major issues associated with diabetes. In this condition, we can think of the blood as being like the consistency of simple syrup, where it should be more like water. This sticky blood accumulates and congests the capillary beds which provide nourishment for the tissues. When this stagnation gets excessive, the tissues begin to starve from the lack of oxygen and nutrients and ultimately the tissue can become necrotic and die. The first ones to go are typically the feet and the eyes, as the feet are the furthest from the heart and difficult to get blood back from, and the eyes have very small capillary beds that easily congest.

One of the more common examples of cold/depression would be overall cold digestion. This is a very typical pattern seen in people these days with all the processed, GMO, etc foods, overuse of antibiotics, and food intolerance. These things tend to depress the gastric fire, called agni in Ayurveda. When this central fire located in the solar plexus becomes weak and deficient, it is very common to see cold signs throughout the entire system, but ultimately there is a lack of digestive faculty and difficulty in fully breaking down, digesting, and absorbing foods.

This ultimately leads to the accumulation of ama, or toxins, that stagnate within the system and congest the channels of the body. This concept is also reflected in our western herbal tradition by Samuel Thomson, who noted that the solar plexus is like a vital fountain of life which distributes heat and vitality throughout the organism, and when that fountain is blocked “canker” accumulates. This is in essence agni/ama theory, but our western equivalent. What these juxtaposed theories are describing is essentially a lack of vital force in the gut which results in systemic effects whose roots are coldness.

A unique pattern we see from the Chinese tradition is what is called “heat from cold,” or “false heat.” This sometimes confusing and hard to assess state arises from there being a baseline coldness in the digestive system, or suppressed agni, leading to the formation of ama in the periphery. This can lead to the activation of inflammatory and immunological processes that lead to enhanced oxidation and thus heat signs. But it is important to understand that this condition is not treated with cooling remedies, but rather with the pungent stimulating plants we will discuss below, as the underlying tissue state behind the superficial signs is that of coldness.

Categories of Herbal Therapeutics
The primary category of plants that we want to use to treat the cold/depression tissue state are remedies that are pungent, warming, spicy, aromatic, and stimulant in nature. These are
Constitutions: Cold/Depression

ultimately plants that simply taste hot in your mouth when you take them! Luckily for us, there are a wide variety of plants that have this overall general energetic property, with each one having specific organ affinities and systems with which it has sympathy towards.

It’s important to consider here the two sides of the tissue state. One is coldness, and the other is depression. Coldness certainly responds to warming remedies, but the depression side of the tissue state responds to stimulants. It is worth noting that not all stimulants are warming! This is a super common misconception, as many herbalists equate something that is stimulating with being warming.

That being said, sometimes plants with a stimulant property- even if cooling energetically- can be applied in this tissue state, especially if it is waking up and getting that organ system moving. This is especially applicable to the liver, which when in a depressed state tends to respond quite well to strong bitter tonic remedies that stimulate the liver. In their bitterness, they tend to have a net cooling effect, but their stimulant action upon the liver is quite notable and remedial for those types of conditions. Here we see the “fragrant bitters” are wonderful remedies, which are herbs that are both aromatic from essential oils and bitter. Good examples there are Calamus (Acorus calamus), Orange peel (Citrus aurantium), and pretty much the entire Artemesia genus (Wormwood, Mugwort, Sweet Annie, Sagebrush etc.) Interestingly the latter genus is the primary set of herbs used to treat infection from parasites and hard to treat resistant bacteria, which as mentioned above are much more prone to get in a cold/depressed system and also generate it when present.

Specific herbal actions that are commonly used for this tissue state would be our stimulant diaphoretics for use in the colder stages of fever, circulatory stimulants to increase circulation of the blood (often a really good overall approach to treating this tissue state, as it usually always affects circulation), carminatives to warm and stimulate digestion, stimulant expectorants to help warm up and disperse cold/damp accumulation in the lungs, and stimulant diuretics for the kidneys. The aromatic bitters are wonderful for treatment of the liver with cold present and various antiseptics are commonly used for this tissue state as well.

Notice the key word in a lot of those actions is stimulant. If we were to narrow it down to one simple word for treating this tissue state, it would be stimulant. We need to get the vital force moving again, to wake up the organs and tissues that have become weak and are not functioning up to par. The root of this is always, always, always, to warm up the solar plexus and rekindle the digestive fire with warming digestive carminatives, as well as increasing the circulation of blood with circulatory stimulants which will distribute that heat throughout the rest of the organism.

Oftentimes many of our stronger warming digestive carminatives are also circulatory stimulants! Imagine that… I’m always stunned at the intelligence of nature and how these plants don’t just do one thing, but rather work on entire physiological patterns of imbalance. Some good examples of remedies that do this are simple remedies like Ginger (Zingiber officinale), Garlic (Allium sativa), Cayenne (Capsicum annum), Black Pepper (Piper nigrum), Angelica (Angelica spp.), and Sassafras (Sassafras albidum).
Constitutions: Cold/Depression

Below you will find differentials for remedies that operate upon the cold/depression tissue state throughout the various organ systems of the body. Note these lists are certainly not exhaustive, but provide a solid foundation for beginning to understand what remedies treat this tissue state throughout the different parts of the body. I encourage you to add to these lists as you see fit.

**Digestive System**

Angelica (*Angelica archangelica*)
Anise (*Pimpinella anisum*)
Calamus (*Acorus calamus*)
Cayenne (*Capsicum annuum*)
Fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare*)
Garlic (*Allium sativum*)
Ginger (*Zingiber officinale*)
Mugwort (*Artemesia vulgaris*)
Oregano (*Origanum vulgare*)
Thyme (*Thymus vulgaris*)
Wormwood (*Artemesia absinthium*)

**Liver/Gallbladder**

Some of these are indicated because they are liver stimulants

Burdock (*Arctium lappa*)
Calendula (*Calendula officinalis*)
Dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*)
Oregon Grape (*Mahonia aquifolium*)
Red Root (*Ceanothus spp.*)
Rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*)
St. John’s Wort (*Hypericum perforatum*)
Turmeric (*Curcuma longa*)
Yellow Dock (*Rumex crispus*)

**Respiratory System**

Balsam root (*Balsamorrhiza sagittata*)
Conifers (Pines, Spruces, Hemlocks, etc)
Cordyceps (*Cordyceps sinensis*)
Elecampane (*Inula helenium*)
Garlic (*Allium sativum*)
Gumweed (*Grindelia spp.*)
Horseradish (*Armoracia rusticana*)
Hyssop (*Hyssopus officinalis*)
Mustard (*Brassica nigra or alba*)
Onion (*Allium cepa*)
Oregano (*Origanum vulgare*)
Osha (*Ligusticum grayi*)
Poplar buds/Balm of Gilead (*Populus spp.*)
Propolis
Constitutions: Cold/Depression

Thyme (Thymus vulgaris)
Yerba Santa (Eriodictyon californicum)

Cardiovascular System

Black Pepper (Piper nigrum)
Cayenne (Capsicum annuum)
Foxglove (Digitalis purpurea) *Note: this herb is toxic and potentially fatal!
Garlic (Allium sativa)
Ginger (Zingiber officinale)
Prickly Ash (Zanthoxylum clava-herculis)
Rosemary (Rosmarinus officinalis)
Sassafras (Sassafras albidum)
Stoneroot (Collinsonia canadensis)
Turmeric (Curcuma longa)

Urinary Tract

Buchu (Agathosma betulina)
Goldenrod (Solidago canadensis)
Gravelroot (Eupatorium purpureum)
Juniper (Juniperus communis)
Nettle leaf (Urtica dioica)
Pipsissewa (Chimaphila umbellata)
Queen Anne’s Lace (Daucus carota)

Male Reproductive System

Chinese Ginseng (Panax ginseng)
Gravelroot (Eupatorium purpureum)
Queen Anne’s Lace (Daucus carota)

Female Reproductive System

Angelica (Angelica spp.)
Black Cohosh (Cimicifuga racemosa) - psychological depression
Cayenne (Capsicum annuum)
Chaste Tree (Vilex aegnus-castus)
Dong quai (Angelica sinensis)
Ginger (Zingiber officinale)
Queen Anne’s Lace (Daucus carota)
Rosemary (Rosmarinus officinalis)
Shepherd’s Purse (Capsella bursa-pastoris)
Turmeric (Curcuma longa)

Lymphatic/Immune

Balsam root (Balsamorrhiza sagittata)
Black Pepper (Piper nigrum)
Calendula (Calendula officinalis)
Constitutions: Cold/Depression

Cayenne (Capsicum annuum)
Echinacea (Echinacea angustifolia)
Figwort (Scrophularia nodosa)
Garlic (Allium sativum)
Ginger (Zingiber officinale)
Oregano (Origanum vulgare)
Prickly Ash (Xanthoxylum americanum)
Red Cedar (Thuja plicata)
Rosemary (Rosmarinus officinalis)
Thyme (Thymus vulgaris)
Wild Indigo (Baptisia tinctoria)

Nervous System

Ashwaganda (Withania somnifera)
Calamus (Acorus calamus)
Catnip (Nepeta cataria)
Kava-Kava (Piper methysticum)
Mugwort (Artemisia vulgaris)
Rosemary (Rosmarinus officinalis)
Valerian (Valeriana officinalis)
Wild Lettuce (Lactuca virosa) - ©Note: this is only with low doses (1-5 drops)

Endocrine System

Ashwaganda (Withania somnifera)
Asian Ginseng (Panax ginseng) - ©Note: The red form is the hottest, the white form is less so.
Astragalus (Astragalus membranaceus)
Cordyceps (Cordyceps chinensis)
Devil’s Club (Oplopanax horridus)
Eleuthero (Eleutherococcus senticosus)
Schizandra (Schizandra chinensis)