Headache

Introduction

In TCM, headache is a common disease. There are 79.9 upon every 100,000 people who suffer from headache reported yearly in China. There is an increase of headache patients under 30 years of age. The ratio of headache patients for men to women is 1:4.

Headache could be one of the symptoms among many patients who suffer from chronic diseases. In such cases, headache could indicate the progression of the related chronic disease, a sign of deterioration in some cases.

Headache is described as the patients feel pain in the head area. The causes for headache are:

- internal unbalance or
- external pathogens

Both can cause the Mai Luo under nourished and sudden blockage that lead to headache.

Among the headache patients in china, TCM proves to be able to help chronic and difficult to cure headache.

In western medicine, one side headache, periodical headache, headache due to stress and chronic headache, all these are grouped under headache in TCM.

Symptoms

Patients feel pain in either vertex, forehead or side of the head or a combination of these areas.

TCM make differentiation based on where the pain is felt, with eth esix layers model, they are: Tai Yang, Yang Ming, Shao Yang, Tai Yin, Shao Yin or Jue Yin.

TCM also make differentiation based on the causes, if headache is caused by internal unbalance or external pathogens, if the headache is chronic or acute, also the quality of pain.

External pathogens cause headache mostly with sudden onset, severe pain, the head seems to crack. pain persist during the whole episode. Pain qualities could be heavy, pulsating, distended.

Internal unbalance causes headache mostly with slow onset, pain is less severe, pain comes and goes within an episode, often with chronic medical background. Pain qualities could be empty, background, with dizziness. Fatigue and emotional disharmonies make the headache worse.

Aetiologies

1. External Pathogens (外感)

   The main external pathogens are wind, cold, heat and dampness.

   Wind is a yang pathogen, diseases caused by wind could go up to the tip of the mountain, as it was said in the old books.
Cold is yin pathogen, when wind and cold are combined, cold could injure the yang as well as create blood stasis. This leads to the under nourishment of mai luo, result in sudden onset of headache.

Wind and heat together could injure Jing, blood, qi. As a result, qi and blood could be away from their normal pathway, thus result in headache.

Wind and dampness together, wind attack the top of the head, dampness blocks the clear yang to the top, the brain and the head are deprived of nourishment, thus headache occurs.

2. Internal unbalances (内伤)

Liver, spleen and kidney pathologies are involved here.

For liver pathology, liver yin xu or kidney yin xu could lead to liver yang raising. Excessive emotional anger could throw liver out of balance, repressed anger could lead to fire, prolongation of such state could lead to liver yin xu and thus liver yang raising. These could lead to mai luo under nourishment, thus headache.

For spleen pathology, mostly due to inappropriate intake of food and drink, or overwork could also be the cause. These reasons affect the transport function of spleen, thus accumulation of dampness, clear yang can not goes up, turbic yin can not come down, like wise this lead to mai luo under nourishment.

Illness, giving birth or loss of blood could lead to Yin and Blood xu, this could lead to under nourishment of the brain and marrow, thus under nourishment of mai luo, and headache follows.

For kidney pathology, it could be prenatal, over work, injuries or long standing illness could also deplete the kidneys energy, result in mai luo under nourishment, thus headache.

The head is the house of Jing and Ming, it controls the Shen and Ming. The head contains the brain and the marrow. The body's Jing gathers in the head. The blood of the Zhang organs and the clear yang qi of the Fu organs gather in the brain. These are essential in nourishing the brain and the marrow, invigorate the shen, maintain a balance of the body.

Headache happens in the head, related to spleen, liver and kidneys ZhangFu, wind, fire, phlegm, stagnation and xu are the main causes of headache.

**Diagnostics**

1. Pain in the head is the main complaint, the pain could be on the vertex, on the side, occiput or the whole head. It could be sudden onset, strong pain non stop like head is cracking. It could also be recurring, resistant to TCM treatments, come and go, attack of headache could last some minutes to hours even weeks.
2. Should distinguish between external pathogens or internal injuries. Sudden onset or recurring nature.
3. Should send for blood test, measure the blood pressure, send for EEG, if possible and necessary, send for MRI to ensure that there is no known anatomical problems.

**Differentiation**

In TCM, it is important to differentiate headache from:

1. 类中风, lei zhong feng, most patients are above 45, recurrent dizziness, wind and phlegm are the trigger factors for sudden pain in the head, often with half side of the body not being able to move in the normal flexible way or difficulties with speech.
2. 真头痛，zhen tou tong, mostly with sudden onset, severe pain in the head, pain continue with vomiting and nose running without control, patients could have also spasm in the hands and legs.

**Treatment based on differentiation**

**Main differentiation:**

1. Severity of pain: generally speaking, external pathogens triggered headache with cold, one side headache are more severe pain. Internal injuries, blood xu, qi xu, liver and kidney xu, the pain is less severe. Qi xu headache is worse in the morning, blood xu headache is worst in the afternoon.
2. Nature of pain: headache caused by phlegm and dampness, the pain has a heavy nature. Headache caused by liver fire has a pulsating nature. Headache caused by cold has penetrating characteristics. Yang raising headache has expanding nature, qi and blood, liver kidney yin xu headache, the pain is less severe and the head feels empty.
3. Location of pain: generally speaking, qi, blood, liver and kidney yin xu headache is spread over the whole head. Yang raising headache is on the occiput down to the neck. Cold triggered headache mostly on the vertex. Liver fire headache on the cheeks, if it is one side headache, then the pain is on the side of the cheek, sometime the head extends to the teeth or eye of the same side.
4. Causes of the pain: qi xu headache is related to tireness. Cold and dampness headache changes with the change of weather. Liver fire headache changes with the emotional instability. Yang raising headache often get worse after drinking excessive alcohol or eating inappropriately. Liver and kidney yin xu headache often get worse with insomnia or other diseases’ progression. One side headache often get worse with wind and cold attack from outside.

**Treatment principle:**

Headache is an under nourishment of the mai luo.

Headache caused by external pathogens, the strategy here is to eliminate the external pathogen concerned and invigorate the luo mai.

Headache caused Internal unbalances, the strategy here is to tonify the deficiency concerned and eliminate the excess in concerned.

**A. External Pathogen triggered headache**

**Wind Cold**

Symptoms: sudden onset, severe pain like breaking, pain extend to the neck and the back. Sensitive to cold and wind from outside. Not thirsty, tongue with white coat and pulse has floating and tied nature.

Method: Eliminate the wind and disperse the cold

Prescription: 川芎茶调散, Chuan Qiong Cha Tiao San

Acupuncture points: Du 20, Tai Yang, gb 20, li 4. Bl 12 (cupping)

**Wind Heat**

Symptoms: pain with distended sensation, cracking sensation, could have fever, sensitive to wind, thirsty, like to drink, red face, red eye, constipation, yellow urine, red tongue body, yellow coat, pulse floating and fast.

Method: Eliminate the wind and clear the heat
Prescription: 芎芷石膏汤, Qiong Zhi Shi Gao Tang  
Acupuncture points: Du 20, tai yang, gb 20, li 4, Li 11.

**Wind Dampness**

Symptoms: headache with heavy body, stuffy chest, little urine, sticky stool, sticky white coat with sleeply Pulse.

Method: eliminate wind, transform the dampness

Prescription: 羌活胜湿汤, Qiang Huo Sheng Shi Tang  
Acupuncture points: Du 20, tai yang, gb 20, li 4, St 8, Gb 34.

**B. Internal unbalances**

**Liver Yang**

Symptoms: pain, distended, dizziness, irritable, flank pain, sleep disturbance, bite taste in the mouth, red tongue body with little yellow coat, pulse: deep, wiry and forceful.

Method: Pacify the liver and subdue the yang

Prescription: 天麻钩藤饮, Tian Ma Gou Teng Yin  
Acupuncture points: GB 5, Gb 4, Gb 20, Liv 3, Gb 40, Ah Shi points. Plus ShiShenCong if dizziness.

**Kidney Xu**

Symptoms: headache with empty head, dizziness, lower back pain, fatigue, vaginal discharge, premature ejaculation, tinnitus, red tongue with little coat, pulse deep forceless.

Method: Tonify the kidney and nourish the yin

Prescription: 大补元煎, Da Bu Yuan Jian  
Acupuncture points: Du 20, Bl 18, Bl 23, Sp 6, Liv 3 throug Ki 1. Plus Pe 8, Ki 1 if five palm heat.

**Qi and Blood Xu**

Symptoms: headache with dizziness, easily frighten, fatigue make it worse. Sweating, shortness of breath, sensitive to wind, tire without force, pale face, pale tongue with thin white coat. Pulse deep and weak.

Method: Tonify qi and blood

Prescription: 八珍汤, Ba Zhen Tang  
Acupuncture points: Du 23, Du 20, SP 10, St 36, Sp 6. Plus Bl 18, BL 20, Bl 23 and Ren 6 when the headache episode is over.

**Phlegm**

Symptoms: headache, blur in the head, stuffy chest, fat tongue with teeth mark. Tongue coat white and sticky, pulse deep and wiry or deep and sleepery???

Method: Tonify the spleen to eliminate the phlegm, stop pain

Prescription: 半夏白术天麻汤, Ban Xia Bai Zhu Tian Ma Tang  
Acupuncture points: Ren 12, St 40, Du 20, Yin Tang, Ah Shi Points. Plus Pe 6 if vomiting, plus st 25 if the stool is watery.
**Blood Stasis**

Symptoms: headache with long history, resistant to treatment, sharp pain, fixed location, it could also due to accident history. Purple tongue or tongue with spots, coat thin and white, pulse deep and thin.

Method: transform the blood stasis, invigorate the luo mai

Prescription: 通窍活血汤, Tong Qiao Huo Xie Tang

Acupuncture points: Li 4, Sp 6, Bl 17, Bl 40 (Bleed), Ah Shi points. Plus Bl2 if headache extends to the eye area, plus Tai Yang if it is one side headache, plus Gb 20 and Bl 10 if headache is at the occiput area. Plus ShiShenCong if headache is at the vertex area.

In addition to the above guidelines, one can also include herbs based on the location of the headache.

- Such as tai yang headache, use 羌活, Qiang Huo, Notopterygii, Radix et rhizoma. 防风, Fang Feng, Ledebouriellae = Saposhnikoviae, Radix.
- Such as Yang Ming headache, use 白芷, Bai Zhi, Angelicae dahuricae, Radix. 葛根, Ge Gen Puerariae, Radix.
- Such as shao yang headache, use 川芎, Ligustici chuanxiong, Radix, Chuan Xiong. 柴胡, Chai Hu, Bupleuri, Radix.
- Such as tai yin headache, use 苍术, Cang Zhu, Atractylodis lanceae, Rhizoma
- Such as shao yin headache, use 细辛, Xi Xin, Asari, Herba et radix
- Such as jue yin headache, use 吴茱萸, Wu Zhu Yu, Evodiae rutaecarpae, Fructus. 藁本, Gao Ben, Ligustici sinensis, Radix et rhizoma

For acupuncture points:

- Plus Yin Tang if headache is at the forehead.
- Plus Tw 5 if one side headache
- Plus Bl 10 if headache is at the occiput
- Plus ShiShenCong if headache is at the vertex

In clinics, one side headache with sudden onset, left and right alternate, pain could extend to the teeth and eye, mostly caused by liver wind with fire. Use 天麻钩藤饮, Tian Ma Gou Teng Yin or 羚角钩藤汤 Ling Jiao Gou Teng Tang.

**Clinical Remarks**

Generally speaking, headache caused by external pathogens, the episode is short, treatment is short and the result is often good.

Headache caused by Internal unbalances has a longer episode, headache has recur nature, difficult to treat.

It is to note that some headache caused by wind fire or raising yang turn into fire, in severe case, this could cause strokes or blindness or simply dizziness.

**Preventive measure**

Patients who suffer from headache during attack phase, should take rest, avoid fried and spicy food, avoid cigarettes and alcohol. When the patient is nervous and agitated, try to calm the patient with gentle words or other means. When the headache is gone, the patient should pay attention to his/her mood, food and living space with good temperature, this will help to avoid the headache to recur.
Summary

The main causes of headache could be classified as external pathogens and internal unbalances.

It is important to be able to make the distinction.

External pathogens, wind is the main cause, cold, heat and dampness too can cause headache, they are all of excess nature. Sudden onset, constant severe pain, short episode are the main characteristics. Treatment principle is to eliminate the pathogen and invigorate the Luo mai.

Internal unbalances headache are caused by Kidney, qi and blood xu, these are deficiency cases. Liver yang, phlegm and dampness and blood stasis are mostly excess cases. In some cases, it could be a combination of excess and deficiency. The treatment principle is to tonify the deficiency, nourish the yin and the blood, or for excess cases, to eliminate the phlegm or dampness, sooth the liver.

It is to note that in TCM, it is not sufficient to treat the pain in the head by giving stop pain herbs alone. The underling causes are to be treated. Acupuncture together with herbs prove to be a good and efficient therapy for headache.

Appendixes

川芎茶调散, Chuan Qiong Cha Tiao San
(Chuan Xiong, Bo He, Bai Zhi, Qiang Huo, Xi Xin, Jing Jie, Fang Feng, Gan Cao)

芎芷石膏汤, Qiong Zhi Shi Gao Tang
(Chuan Xiong, Bai Zhi, Shi Gao, Ju Hua, Gao Ben, Qiang Huo)

羌活胜湿汤, Qiang Huo Sheng Shi Tang
(Qiang Huo, Du Huo, Gao Ben, Fang Feng, Chuan Xiong, Man Jing Zi, Zhi Gan Cao)

天麻钩藤饮, Tian Ma Gou Teng Yin
(Tian Ma, Gou Teng, Shi Jue Ming, Zhi Zi, Huang Qin, Yi Mu Cao, Chuan Niu Xi, Du Zhong, Sang Ji Shen, Ye Jiao Teng, FuShen)

大补元煎, Da Bu Yuan Jian
(Ren Shen, Shan Yao, ShuDiHuang, DuZhong, DangGui, ShanZhuYu, GouQiZi, ZhiGanCao)

八珍汤, Ba Zhen Tang
(RenShen, BaiZhu, FuLing, ZhiGanCao, ShuDi, BaiShao, DangGui, ChuanXiong)

半夏白术天麻汤, Ban Xia Bai Zhu Tian Ma Tang
(BanXia, BaiZhu, TianMa, JuHong, FuLing, GanCao, ShengJiang, DaZao)

通窍活血汤, Tong Qiao Huo Xie Tang
(ChiShao, ChuanXiong, TaoRen, HongHua, CongBai, DaZao, ShengJiang, SheXiang)