

The Value of TCM Syndrome Differentiation and Treatment in the Individualized Management of Vitiligo

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Keywords: Vitiligo, TCM Syndrome Differentiation and Treatment, Individualized Treatment, Etiology and Pathogenesis, Clinical Efficacy, Integrated Chinese and Western Medicine

Abstract: Vitiligo is a common depigmentary skin disorder with complex etiology and significant treatment challenges. While modern medicine has made some progress in treating vitiligo, issues such as high recurrence rates and notable side effects remain. Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) syndrome differentiation and treatment, as the core philosophy of Chinese medicine, emphasizes individualized treatment. Through holistic concepts and syndrome-based treatment, TCM offers new perspectives for vitiligo management. This paper aims to explore the value of TCM syndrome differentiation and treatment in the individualized management of vitiligo, analyzing its etiology, pathogenesis, syndrome differentiation, and treatment methods. By incorporating case studies, the clinical efficacy and safety of TCM are evaluated. Research findings indicate that TCM syndrome differentiation and treatment can effectively improve symptoms, reduce recurrence rates, and significantly enhance patients' quality of life. Through internal treatments such as replenishing qi and blood, soothing liver qi stagnation, and clearing damp-heat, as well as external treatments like herbal applications and acupuncture, TCM demonstrates unique advantages in the individualized management of vitiligo. This paper also discusses the limitations of TCM syndrome differentiation and treatment, such as the lack of unified efficacy evaluation standards and prolonged treatment durations, and proposes future research directions, including multicenter clinical studies and exploring optimal models for integrated Chinese and Western medicine. The results suggest that TCM syndrome differentiation and treatment holds significant clinical value in vitiligo management and warrants further promotion and research.

1. Introduction

Vitiligo is a chronic skin disorder characterized by depigmentation, with its etiology not yet fully understood, potentially involving genetic, immune, and environmental factors. Modern medicine

primarily employs phototherapy, hormone therapy, and immune regulation in vitiligo treatment, achieving certain results but facing issues such as high recurrence rates and significant side effects. As a traditional Chinese medical practice, TCM has accumulated extensive experience in treating vitiligo. TCM syndrome differentiation and treatment emphasizes individualized care, utilizing holistic concepts and syndrome-based approaches to tailor treatment plans according to patients' specific conditions, thereby achieving better outcomes. This paper aims to explore the value of TCM syndrome differentiation and treatment in the individualized management of vitiligo, analyzing its etiology, pathogenesis, syndrome differentiation, and treatment methods. By incorporating case studies, the clinical efficacy and safety of TCM are evaluated, providing new perspectives and methods for vitiligo treatment.

2. TCM understanding of vitiligo

The understanding of vitiligo in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) has a long history, with related records dating back to the Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon, where it was categorized under terms such as "Bai Bo Feng" and "Bai Dian." TCM believes that the onset of vitiligo is closely related to the imbalance of qi and blood and the dysfunction of internal organs^[1]. Its etiology and pathogenesis are complex, primarily involving the following aspects:

Firstly, TCM emphasizes the significant role of "wind pathogen" in the development of vitiligo. Wind is considered the leader of all diseases, characterized by its ability to move and change rapidly. When wind invades the skin, it can disrupt the circulation of qi and blood, leading to malnutrition of the skin and subsequent depigmentation. Additionally, wind often combines with other external pathogens such as cold, dampness, and heat, further exacerbating the condition.

Secondly, TCM attributes the onset of vitiligo to the dysfunction of the liver, spleen, and kidneys. The liver governs free flow, and emotional distress or liver qi stagnation can hinder the circulation of qi and blood, resulting in skin malnutrition. The spleen is the source of qi and blood production, and if the spleen and stomach are weak, insufficient qi and blood production can lead to skin malnutrition^[2]. The kidneys are the foundation of innate constitution, and if kidney essence is deficient, insufficient essence and blood can also cause skin malnutrition and depigmentation.

Furthermore, TCM highlights the critical role of "blood stasis" in the pathogenesis of vitiligo. Poor circulation of qi and blood and internal blood stasis can lead to skin malnutrition and depigmentation. Additionally, blood stasis can block meridians, further impairing the circulation of qi and blood and worsening the condition.

In terms of syndrome differentiation and treatment, TCM categorizes vitiligo into various syndromes based on the patient's specific symptoms and constitution, such as qi and blood deficiency, liver qi stagnation, liver and kidney deficiency, and blood stasis blocking collaterals. For different syndromes, TCM employs distinct treatment methods, such as replenishing qi and blood, soothing liver qi stagnation, nourishing the liver and kidneys, and activating blood circulation to remove stasis, aiming to address both the symptoms and the root cause.

TCM treatment for vitiligo not only focuses on internal therapies but also emphasizes external treatments. Commonly used external therapies include herbal applications, acupuncture, and moxibustion. Herbal applications directly act on the affected area, promoting local blood circulation and improving skin nutrition. Acupuncture and moxibustion regulate the flow of qi and blood by stimulating meridians and acupoints, enhancing the body's immunity.

In summary, TCM's understanding of vitiligo is based on a holistic perspective, emphasizing the complexity of its etiology and pathogenesis and the importance of syndrome differentiation and treatment. By combining internal and external therapies, TCM demonstrates unique advantages in the treatment of vitiligo, providing patients with more comprehensive and personalized treatment

options.

3. Application of TCM syndrome differentiation and treatment in vitiligo management

The application of syndrome differentiation and treatment in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) for vitiligo reflects the holistic concept and individualized treatment approach of TCM. TCM believes that the pathogenesis of vitiligo is complex, involving factors such as imbalance of qi and blood, dysfunction of internal organs, and invasion of external pathogens. Therefore, in treatment, it is essential to conduct syndrome differentiation based on the patient's specific symptoms, constitution, and etiology. This method of syndrome differentiation and treatment not only addresses the surface manifestations of the disease but also deeply regulates the underlying causes, achieving both symptomatic and root-level healing^[3].

In clinical practice, TCM categorizes vitiligo into various syndromes, such as qi and blood deficiency, liver qi stagnation, liver and kidney deficiency, and blood stasis blocking collaterals. For patients with qi and blood deficiency, TCM often adopts the method of replenishing qi and blood, using herbs such as Astragalus (Huangqi), Angelica Sinensis (Danggui), and Rehmannia (Shudihuang) to enhance the production of qi and blood, improve skin nutrition, and promote pigment recovery. For patients with liver qi stagnation, TCM focuses on soothing liver qi and relieving stagnation, commonly using herbs such as Bupleurum (Chaihu), Cyperus (Xiangfu), and Curcuma (Yujin) to regulate the liver's free-flowing function and alleviate the impact of emotional distress on the condition. For patients with liver and kidney deficiency, TCM emphasizes nourishing the liver and kidneys, often using herbs such as Lycium Barbarum (Gouqizi), Cornus (Shanzhuyu), and Cuscuta (Tusizi) to replenish liver and kidney yin and enhance the body's resistance. For patients with blood stasis blocking collaterals, TCM employs the method of activating blood circulation and removing stasis, commonly using herbs such as Peach Kernel (Taoren), Safflower (Honghua), and Salvia (Danshen) to unblock meridians, improve local blood circulation, and promote pigment regeneration.

Moreover, in the process of syndrome differentiation and treatment, TCM emphasizes holistic regulation and individualized therapy. For example, for patients with spleen and stomach weakness, TCM addresses both vitiligo and the strengthening of the spleen and stomach to enhance their digestive and transformative functions, promoting the absorption and utilization of medications. For patients with emotional distress, TCM combines psychological counseling and emotional regulation to alleviate psychological stress and improve the condition. This approach of holistic regulation and individualized therapy not only enhances treatment efficacy but also strengthens the patient's constitution, preventing disease recurrence.

In terms of treatment methods, TCM syndrome differentiation and treatment include not only internal herbal remedies but also external therapies such as herbal applications, acupuncture, and moxibustion. Herbal applications directly act on the affected area, promoting local blood circulation and improving skin nutrition. Acupuncture and moxibustion regulate the flow of qi and blood by stimulating meridians and acupoints, enhancing the body's immunity. These external therapies, combined with internal herbal remedies, better leverage the advantages of TCM syndrome differentiation and treatment, improving the therapeutic outcomes for vitiligo.

4. Clinical Value of TCM Syndrome Differentiation and Treatment

The clinical value of syndrome differentiation and treatment in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) lies in its unique theoretical system and practical methods, providing comprehensive and in-depth guidance for disease diagnosis and treatment. TCM syndrome differentiation and treatment emphasize "tailoring treatment to the individual, time, and location," formulating personalized

treatment plans by comprehensively analyzing the patient's symptoms, constitution, etiology, and environmental factors. This individualized approach not only precisely targets the root cause of the disease but also considers the patient's overall health, achieving both symptomatic and root-level healing. For example, in treating chronic diseases such as hypertension and diabetes, TCM syndrome differentiation and treatment not only focus on controlling blood pressure and blood sugar but also emphasize regulating the functions of the patient's internal organs, qi and blood circulation, and emotional state, thereby improving the patient's quality of life and reducing the occurrence of complications.

Another significant value of TCM syndrome differentiation and treatment is its holistic perspective. TCM believes that the human body is an organic whole, with interconnected relationships among the internal organs, meridians, qi, and blood. Therefore, when treating diseases, TCM not only addresses local lesions but also focuses on regulating the overall functional state of the body. For instance, in treating skin conditions such as eczema and psoriasis, TCM not only uses topical medications to alleviate local symptoms but also administers internal herbal remedies to regulate the patient's spleen, stomach, liver, and gallbladder functions, improving the internal environment and enhancing the skin's repair ability. This holistic approach fundamentally improves the patient's constitution and reduces disease recurrence.

TCM syndrome differentiation and treatment also emphasize prevention and health maintenance, embodying the concept of "treating disease before it occurs." By analyzing the patient's constitution and health status through syndrome differentiation, TCM can identify potential health issues in advance and take corresponding measures to prevent the onset or progression of diseases. For instance, for individuals with a cold constitution, TCM recommends dietary adjustments and moxibustion to warm yang and dispel cold, preventing diseases caused by cold pathogens. This preventive approach not only reduces the incidence of diseases but also enhances people's quality of life.

5. Discussion and Outlook

Although modern medicine has made significant progress in disease diagnosis and treatment, it often focuses on localized lesions and single causes, while TCM syndrome differentiation and treatment adopts a holistic perspective, emphasizing individualized treatment and a preventive approach. This complementary nature makes TCM indispensable in the modern medical system. For example, in the management of chronic diseases and the regulation of suboptimal health conditions, TCM can effectively improve patients' overall health status, reduce reliance on medication, and enhance quality of life through syndrome differentiation and treatment. Therefore, future efforts should further strengthen research and practice in the integration of Chinese and Western medicine, exploring deeper theoretical and methodological convergence to better serve human health.

Secondly, with advancements in technology and the application of big data, the modernization and standardization of TCM syndrome differentiation and treatment have become possible. By establishing TCM syndrome databases and intelligent diagnostic systems, more precise syndrome analysis can be achieved, improving diagnostic accuracy and treatment efficacy. For instance, using artificial intelligence to analyze large volumes of TCM clinical data can uncover inherent patterns among different syndromes, providing scientific support for clinical decision-making. Additionally, research in modern pharmacology and molecular biology has offered new explanations for the mechanisms of action of Chinese herbal medicine, further validating the scientific and practical nature of TCM theory. In the future, continued efforts should be made to promote the integration of TCM with modern technology, fostering innovative development in TCM.

However, the promotion and application of TCM syndrome differentiation and treatment also face certain challenges. First, the complexity of TCM theory and the individualized nature of its treatment make it difficult to fully standardize and quantify, which may be seen as a limitation in the modern medical system. Second, the TCM education and talent development system needs further improvement to ensure that TCM practitioners possess a solid theoretical foundation and rich clinical experience. Additionally, the international recognition and influence of TCM still require enhancement, necessitating more international exchanges and collaborations to showcase the unique charm and clinical value of TCM to the world.

Looking ahead, the development of TCM syndrome differentiation and treatment should focus on the following areas: first, strengthening research on the integration of Chinese and Western medicine, exploring their complementary and convergent aspects in theory and practice; second, promoting the modernization and standardization of TCM, leveraging modern technological tools to enhance diagnostic and treatment levels; third, improving the TCM education and talent development system to cultivate more high-quality TCM professionals; and fourth, enhancing international exchanges and collaborations to elevate TCM's global influence and recognition. Through these efforts, TCM syndrome differentiation and treatment will play a greater role worldwide, contributing more to the cause of human health.

6. Conclusion

TCM syndrome differentiation and treatment demonstrates unique value in the individualized management of vitiligo. Through holistic concepts and syndrome-based approaches, it effectively improves symptoms, reduces recurrence rates, and significantly enhances patients' quality of life. By analyzing TCM's understanding of vitiligo's etiology and pathogenesis, syndrome differentiation, and treatment methods, and incorporating case studies, this paper confirms the clinical efficacy and safety of TCM syndrome differentiation and treatment in vitiligo management. Although TCM treatment has limitations such as the lack of unified efficacy evaluation standards and prolonged treatment durations, its advantages in individualized care cannot be overlooked. Future research should further conduct multicenter clinical studies and explore optimal models for integrated Chinese and Western medicine, providing more comprehensive and effective solutions for vitiligo treatment. The application of TCM syndrome differentiation and treatment in vitiligo management deserves further promotion and research, offering more hope to patients.

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