

The Liver, Ki, and Women's Health

David Briscoe

Since it's spring and the Liver season, I would like to share my experiences with the Liver as it applies to women's health. The view of the Liver as seen through Eastern medical tradition is so useful when addressing women's health that I can't imagine a woman fully overcoming or preventing the recurrence of any female health problem without being introduced to its application. To my knowledge, this view of the Liver has not been presented in the macrobiotic teachings, though many macrobiotic healing methods have been developed from Eastern energy medicine. And in the current presentations of Traditional Chinese Medicine, with few exceptions, the importance of the Liver to women's health is so hidden by complex theories and clinical jargon that only the well-trained acupuncturist or herbalist can grasp it. As a result, most women, even those who follow alternative health paths, have not encountered this view of Liver and its association with their health. It is my hope that this article can highlight this unique view of the Liver in a way that simplifies it and makes it useful to many women as a self-health tool.



I capitalize the word Liver when using it as viewed by Eastern energy medicine, in order to distinguish it from the liver of modern anatomy and physiology. The Liver of Eastern medicine is understood more as a field of functions that includes what modern anatomy calls the liver, but is not isolated to the organ itself. It is not necessary to have a highly-trained understanding of Eastern medicine in order to apply some of its methods to one's own

health, and for our purposes here I will use very broad strokes when painting a view of the Liver of Eastern medical theory.

Ki can be generally defined as "energy." It circulates in the body through meridians, or channels, to reach every cell that is charged and vitalized by it. This is roughly comparable to how blood circulates in an orderly way through arteries, vessels, and capillaries to deliver to each cell the oxygen, nourishment, hormones, and other substances necessary for the vitality of the body. Though ki and the meridians are invisible to the naked eye, they are not mystical concepts. They are real and substantial, having been understood and used for thousands of years by billions of people as the basis for their traditional medicine including dietary therapy, acupuncture, herbs, qigong, and palm healing.

The numerous meridians have specific names, and through the "Liver meridian," Liver ki flows. The Liver meridian and Liver ki are especially important to women's health, since they have a profound influence on the entire pelvic area. A Liver meridian begins at the out-

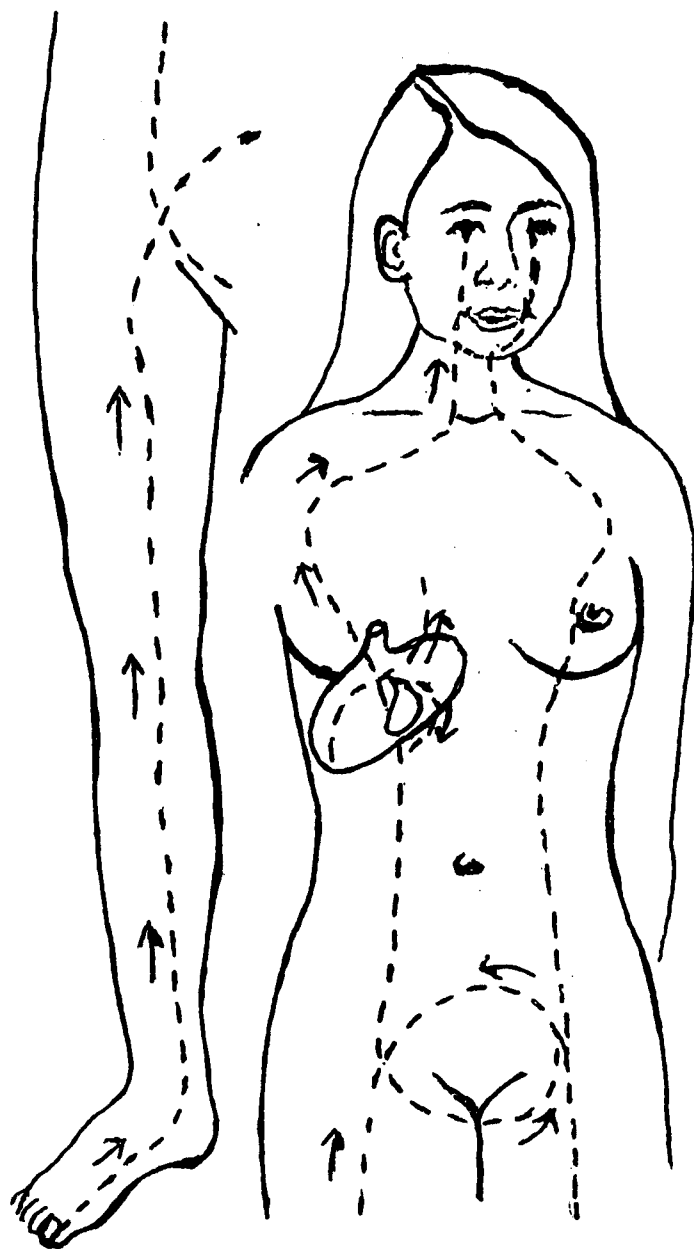


Fig. 1 Liver Meridian

side edge of each big toe and moves up the inside of each leg. In a woman it enters the pelvic area where it wraps around the uterus before continuing on up through the body, ending at the eyes. (See Fig. 1.) In the pelvic region, the uterus, ovaries and lowest region of the large intestine are all within the

field of function of Liver ki.

It is known that Liver ki, more than all other ki of the body, is susceptible to stress and extreme fluctuations of emotion and can easily become stuck or stagnant leading to an energy disharmony called "Liver Ki Stagnation." Because Liver ki strongly influences *all* ki flow in the

body, Liver Ki Stagnation affects all meridians, but especially those that move through the pelvic region. As a result ovarian cysts, uterine fibroids, tumors, irregular menstruation, IBS (Irritable Bowel Syndrome), Crohn's Disease, and other conditions within the pelvic area and abdomen can arise. Also, other meridians besides the Liver meridian traverse the pelvic and abdominal region before moving up through the body. (See Fig. 2.) If there is Liver Ki Stagnation in the pelvic region, all these meridians passing through the pelvis on their way up the body will also be affected, resulting in energy stagnation in areas outside the pelvis and abdomen. This is especially true of the breasts, where cysts, recurring soreness, lumps, and tumors have become so common, as well as the throat where thyroid trouble and other symptoms arise due to energy stagnation in the meridians there. Energy stagnation in the throat can manifest not only as physical problems but also as psychological or emotional inhibition where the woman feels that she does not have a voice for herself in many areas of her life.

PMS, another result of Liver Ki Stagnation, arises when there is a blockage of the energy that would normally and easily have flowed down and out during healthy menstruation. The blocked energy is forced to move upward, adversely affecting the lungs, heart, and head, giving rise to irritability and emotional swings. In Fig. 3 we can see the various zones of the body that are strongly influenced by Liver Ki Stagnation.

When Liver Ki Stagnation is present, the Liver becomes "full." This very commonly leads to "emptiness" of the Spleen. In Eastern energy medicine, the Spleen stands for the entire process of digestion. Many digestive symptoms accompany Liver Ki Stagnation,

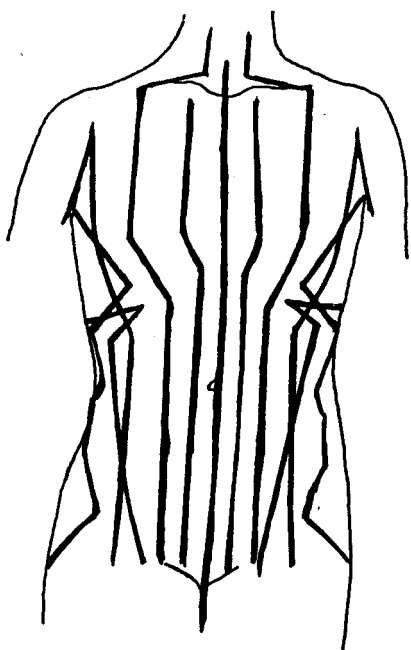


Fig. 2 Meridians Traversing the Pelvis and Abdomen

rhythm of the body functions and ki flow. Factors that interfere with this, such as birth control pills and certain work schedules that can upset the biorhythms (flight attendants' schedules, for example), negatively affect the Liver's maintenance of smooth and regular flow of ki throughout the body. Birth control pills, because they alter hormones and periodicity, are implicated in a higher than normal inci-

and this can be especially true at certain phases of the menstrual cycle when the Liver energy is already naturally full. Many women crave sweets intensely, some even more so during their menstrual cycle, because sweet is the flavor of the Spleen. If there is emptiness of the Spleen, strong sweet cravings can arise, sometimes leading to sugar binges of various kinds. However, this intake of extreme sweet will only further weaken the Spleen over time. It is better if the woman can learn to satisfy the sweet cravings with more naturally sweet foods rather than refined sugar. In addition, Spleen emptiness brought on by Liver Ki Stagnation can cause the water retention that many women experience.

Liver Ki Stagnation can also give rise to a feeling of being stuck in one's current circumstances, unable to get any traction for making changes.

The Liver functions best when there is natural periodicity and

dence of pelvic and breast cysts and tumors.

The Big 3 Attractions

Many women with Liver Ki Stagnation often have a very strong attraction to one or more of the following:

- Coffee and other caffeinated beverages and foods (colas, chocolate, etc.)
- Hot spices
- Extreme exercise

The above foods all help to temporarily move stuck ki by stimulating the circulation. However, in the long run there is stuck ki again since these foods actually aggravate the liver. Some women become addicted to exercise since it also temporarily relieves stuck ki, giving a momentary sense of relaxation and vitality. I have observed a few cases where when even one day of exercise was missed, the woman felt tense, irritable, and restless due to the stuck ki.

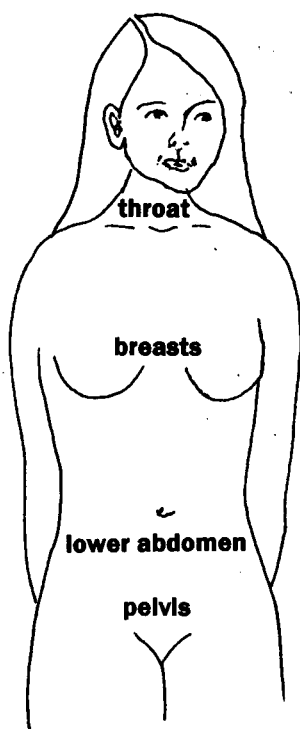


Fig. 3 Liver Zones of Influence

stagnation in the Liver. In addition, heavy use of salty macrobiotic condiments like gomashio, and the over consumption of bread and other baked flour products, combined with a lack of variety and daily under-use of vegetables, are all factors for inhibiting the Liver. Overly yin foods such as alcohol, spices, coffee, oily foods, and drugs will contribute to erratic Liver function. Naturally sweet grains and lightly cooked vegetable dishes can become the foundation of daily meals. Dark, leafy greens can be enjoyed daily, too.

The best way to learn macrobiotic meal planning and cooking is to attend cooking classes with experienced macrobiotic teachers. Food, though, as essential as it is, may need to be complimented by non-dietary practices in order to have complete relief from Liver Ki Stagnation. A complete macrobiotic practice incorporates more than diet alone. Following are the most important non-dietary factors that women I have known have used to successfully relieve Liver Ki Stagnation.

Daily Stress Management

It's important to identify the main stress factors in one's daily life. Modern life is inherently stressful. On top of this are the stress factors of individual circumstances and personal choices. Learning to recognize these stress factors and finding ways of managing them more effec-

Some of the Most Common Symptoms of Liver Ki Stagnation

- Irregular menstruation
- Menstrual cramps
- Vaginal discharge
- Ovarian cysts and tumors
- Uterine cysts, fibroids, tumors
- IBS (Irritable Bowel Syndrome)
- Thyroid problems
- Feeling of something stuck in the throat
- Difficulty expressing oneself vocally
- Chronic digestive troubles that intensify during the menstrual cycle
- Difficult menopause
- Chronic outbursts of anger and irritability
- Pink discoloration whites of the eyes
- Constant sighing in an attempt to relieve upper chest tightness or pressure

tively are challenges for every person, but it is one that should not be ignored. This includes recognizing where there is lack of rhythm in one's work schedule, eating schedule, and sleep cycle.

Emotional Healing/ Self-expression

Recovering natural self-expression and emotional vitality is fundamental to a healthy and happy life. Too many women get involved in a macrobiotic or other dietary practice, expecting it to solve all problems. In some cases, macrobiotic books and teachers have implied that dietary change alone will solve all problems. In my observation this has lead many Western-born women who practice macrobiotics to ignore complimentary approaches that could have been of

What to do?

Liver health is inseparable from diet and lifestyle factors. A woman makes choices in her daily life that contribute to smooth ki or to its stagnation. I have known many women to use the following in the relief and prevention of Liver Ki Stagnation.

Diet

A healthy and varied macrobiotic diet can do wonders in reducing the symptoms of Liver Ki Stagnation. Better yet, a wisely done and varied macrobiotic diet can go a long way to heading off the development of the condition in most women. Macrobiotics teaches that overly yang foods such as meat, chicken, cheese, eggs, heavily salted foods, too much dry food, and hard, baked bread and other flour products such as crackers, rice cakes, cookies, and chips all contribute directly to tension and

great help, including Bioenergetics and other forms of body-centered psychotherapy.

Main Causes of Liver Ki Stagnation

- Long-standing emotional suppression and/or extremes of emotional expression
- Past and/or present sexual and emotional abuse
- Daily stress from unhealthy work environments, unhealthy relationships, city life
- Lack of rhythm and periodicity
- Birth control pills
- Surgery that disturbs the pelvis and lower abdomen
- Not doing what one finds most fulfilling
- Modern diet

Exercise

Physical activity is a necessary part of healthy living. Along with qigong, yoga, and other energy exercises, I have known women with Liver Ki Stagnation to benefit from a regular routine of gentle styles of aerobic exercise. Find an exercise method and routine that works for you and which you enjoy.

Abdominal Massage

Daily hara, or abdominal, self-massage can be very useful for everyone's health, but I have seen it be especially useful to women. I suggest finding instructions in shiatsu or do-in books for abdominal self-massage.

Daily Deep Relaxation

Most people would be astonished by what a 10 to 15 minute daily relaxation practice could do for them,

physically, mentally and emotionally, but all too many dismiss such practices as a waste of time and unproductive. However, we call ourselves human beings, not human doings. In the modern, hurry-up lifestyle more attention is given to doing than to being. A simple relaxation period that relaxes the body and the mind has been a fundamental daily practice for all women I have known who have relieved Liver Ki Stagnation.

Liver-Aggravating Foods

- Alcohol
- Coffee
- Fatty red meats
- Grease, oil
- Spicy hot, pungent foods
- Baked flour products
- Overeating in general
- Preservatives and other food chemicals
- Drugs (legal/illegal)

Restorative Baths

The Salt Bath and/or a Daikon Greens Hip Bath have been used by many women to assist in the healing of problems in the pelvic area. Please consult with an experienced macrobiotic counselor to determine if one of these baths would be useful to you.

Acupuncture/Herbal Support

As an adjunct to the above self-help methods, having regular sessions with an acupuncturist and/or Eastern medical herbalist who is experienced in gynecological health has been found by many women to

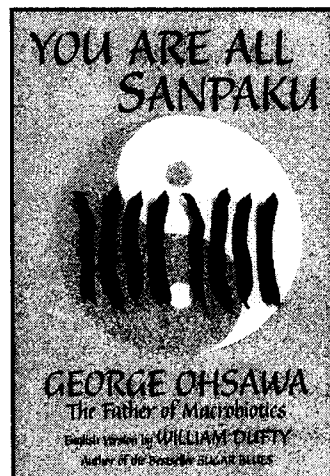
be supportive of the Liver and useful in the relief of Liver Ki Stagnation.

I hope that this short introduction can point a direction for many women and those who care about them to seek a deeper understanding of the Liver and Liver Ki Stagnation.

David Briscoe is co-founder of Macrobiotics America. He provides counseling for the George Ohsawa Macrobiotic Foundation and has developed counselor training courses given over the Internet. David is the author of Personal Peace. See David's website at www.macroamerica.com or email info@macroamerica.com.

Back in Print

This timeless bestseller introduced two new words into our vocabulary—sanpaku and macrobiotics.



\$12.95 plus shipping



**G.O.M.F.
PO Box 3998
Chico, CA 95927**

800-232-2372 or 530-566-9765