

An Integrative Look at Lower Back Pain:
A TCM Perspective with Aquatic Integration Treatment - Claudia Kavcic

Lower back pain is one of the most common and chronic ailments that affect people today. There are many causes and treatments available. The most effective way of treating is determining what the root cause is first then deciding on a course of action. An integrative look will combine Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) theory with the benefits of Aquatic Integration (AI) treatment.

According to TCM, when *qi* and blood flow freely there is no pain. Therefore, pain in any area of the body is due to the non-free-flow of *qi* and/or blood. For pain-free living, longevity and optimum health, it is essential to keep the *qi* and blood full and moving.

According to TCM, the sensation of pain due to *qi* stagnation and blood stasis are different issues. *Qi* stagnation pain feels like distention or soreness that fluctuates, and is often accompanied by strong emotional changes. Blood stasis pain is characterized by painful swelling or sharp, stabbing pain in a fixed location.

If there is a *qi* and blood deficiency, alone or together, the pain isn't severe but persistent. It is worse after rest and better after light use. The pain is aggravated by immobilization because there is insufficient *qi* and blood to keep it moving, so there is pooling and pressure on the pain receptors. Movement helps pump the *qi* and blood around.

If there is mostly *qi* deficiency, the pain is worse at the end of a long day or after excessive exercise. This is because the body will use up too much *qi* and blood and leave it worse off.

If there is more of a blood deficiency the pain will be worse at night. This is because the blood goes to the liver for storage at night, and with a deficient situation there will not be a surplus to circulate efficiently through the entire body.

According to TCM, there are three broad categories of what causes lower back pain: external, internal and independent causes.

External Causes

External causes are attributed to the six environmental excesses. The *qi* and blood flow can be affected by our external environment, where the six environmental excesses are wind, cold, damp, heat, dry, and summer heat. If the defensive *qi* is deficient the environmental energies can become pathogenic, invade the body, and settle in blocking the meridian flow of *qi* and blood. Invasion of external pathogens usually happens in combination of two or three at a time.

For example, wind, heat, cold or damp invades the upper half of the body. The result is a cold, and if it attacks the lower body, the result is acute lower back pain.

Wind pain comes and goes and moves around the body from joint to joint. The wind blocks the qi flow and the pain is achy.

Cold pain has a fixed location and is sharp and severe. The cold congeals the blood flow causing blood stasis. The pain is worse in the cold and better in the warmth.

Damp pain is fixed like cold pain, but is a heavy, sore pain that develops slowly and is chronic in nature. The pain is worse with changes in weather - especially with low barometric pressure. There is often swelling from too much fluid accumulation.

Heat pain is red, swollen and hot and is usually seen in the joints.

As previously mentioned these environmental energies can only invade the body if the defensive qi is weak. If the person has any deficiency in the body, such as weakness in the kidneys and/or liver, the invasion will settle in causing chronic pain. If there is no weakness, the invasion will be short-lived.

Internal Causes

Internal causes of lower back pain are often due to emotional damage. For example, constant fear damages the kidneys leaving the lower back area weak. Then, the person often injures their back from a seemingly harmless movement.

Another example of emotions injuring the lower back is constant worry. Constant worry damages the spleen causing blood deficiency. The spleen makes all the blood of the body, and if it's lacking, the sinews won't be nourished, and the body will be chronically tight and tense. The muscles will not have enough qi and blood to do their job without injury.

Independent Causes

Independent causes of lower back pain are trauma, diet, exercise or excessive activity, lack of movement, sex, poison, and old age.

Trauma and injury result in damage and possible severance of meridians and internal vessels. This causes the qi and blood to flow outside of the vessels, and to pool, causing heat, swelling, redness and pain. The more serious the trauma the more serious the stagnation; therefore, it is important to identify which tissues have been injured.

Trauma to the lower back ranges from mild to severe. Mild and easy-to-treat trauma is injury to the muscles and tendons. Serious trauma affects the ligaments, vertebral body, joints and discs. The worst trauma is injury to the spinal cord.

The ultimate goal is to get the qi and blood flowing freely as soon as possible. Again, when the qi and blood flow there is little to no pain, and the longer you leave the affected area untreated the more complicated the recovery becomes.

The kidneys and liver are the mainstays of strength in the body, and if these organs get weak, the lower back will get even weaker. The kidneys are in charge of nourishment to all the bones of the body, and the liver is in charge of all the tendons and ligaments; that is, sinews.

Poor diet can affect the health of the lower back in relationship with the spleen. The spleen organ is in charge of digestion and functions to transport and transform food and fluids. Overeating sweet, fatty, raw foods and drinking chilled beverages with meals damages the functions of the spleen. When the functions of the spleen are compromised, fluids accumulate then become internal dampness. The dampness hinders the qi and blood flow, putting more strain on lifting and moving, and results in lack of muscle tone.

Exercise or excessive activity and/or lack of exercise injures the lower back. If there is too much exercise or excessive activity, whether it is physical, mental, or emotional, it depletes the spleen and kidneys. It is important not to lift objects that are beyond one's strength to lift. As well, posture is very important, in that if a person is bent over all day at a job, after a while the excessive pressure on the kidneys will start to injure the function of the kidneys, and/or stretch the ligaments resulting in lower back pain.

Too much stillness, or lack of movement, results in spleen damage causing muscular weakness and internal dampness.

In TCM, too much sexual activity depletes the kidney energy and causes lower back pain. Usually, this is in people over the age of 45, immune compromised, or people with weak constitutions.

The substances or poisons that result in lower back pain are any stimulating substance taken in excess such as caffeine, nicotine, drugs and pharmaceuticals. The extra stimulating energy drains the kidneys and adrenals, which in turn weakens the lower back because the kidney energy is what gives the lower back strength.

Old age is a large factor of lower back pain. As we age over 35 years, we produce less *acquired* kidney essence and use more *inherited* kidney essence. If we are not careful, it can result in disc degeneration, herniated disc, osteoporosis, osteoarthritis, chronic lumbago, vertebral fractures, chronic lumbar strain, spinal bone spurs, etc. Because the growth of our bones is a function of the kidneys, this function weakens as the kidneys tire. The kidneys need to be nourished for full recovery of pain resulting from any old age factor.

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It is common to find that in any case of lower back pain, there is a combination of reasons why it hurts. Regardless of the cause, there is some damage to the free flow of qi and blood to the lower back area.

As a practitioner, it is important to take into account all of the person's life and all other issues they may be having - even if they don't seem directly relevant at the time. Gather as much information as possible. Even though the main complaint is manifesting as lower back pain, the root causes are different from person to person, therefore, the treatment will be different according to what the cause is.

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The following are some examples of how treatment with Aquatic Integration (AI) could target each of the causes of lower back pain differently.

Examples of treatment for external invasion lower back pain:

Wind pain treatment will include a whole body focus, allowing the buoyancy of the water to decrease joint compression and increase the stretch factor to the structure. At the beginning of this treatment, the practitioner may notice twitching and jerking of the clients body. This is a sign of wind. Often, you will feel on subtle levels that this person is racing and will want to start the treatment with quicker movements to help shunt out some of this excessive energy. This will help the practitioner to meet the person on the same level. If you think about the characteristics of wind, it is moving and changeable. Eventually, the person's system will calm and the practitioner will want to move to gentle traction to all the joints of the body with a slow release.

Key point release would include traction of the upper thoracic vertebrae, C7/T1 specifically, located at the bony protuberance and space below when the head is tilted down, and cervical vertebrae where it connects to the occipital ridge. These areas are commonly known in TCM as major wind release points, and in a wind condition these areas will have been compressed.

Treating the wind condition with AI moves will include medium-dynamic hip stretch, and ROM as well as hip traction. Back pain conditions should always include iliopsoas release to re-balance the pelvis and the sacrum Hara press. Ending the treatment with some foot massage will help ground the person and indirectly release the lower back, especially when focusing on the inner ridge of the foot below the ankle. This is known as the lumbar vertebrae in reflexology.

Cold pain treatment will be a more focused treatment to the pain site, but you will want to begin the treatment with very gentle distal pressure and slow movements. The distal opening will allow somewhere for the stuck pain to move to. This person will be in quite

a bit of pain and any sudden movements will trigger the pain site and make the client wince in pain.

With the hydrostatic pressure of the water, just floating in the body-temperature water will help to release the cold pain. The decompression of the body unloads the spine, increasing the circulation and efficiency of venous return.

Examples of how AI can treat internal causes of lower back pain from emotional damage:

Being in the water requires a large amount of trust from the client. When beginning to float someone, it is possible to feel the level of trust almost immediately. The person's body may be stiff as a board, holding and bracing, or they can be overly trusting and feel like a limp noodle. The goal is to have the person somewhere in the middle. You want to develop trust so that the client's body isn't more sore after the treatment. You also want the person to be responsible for their self, where there is a symbiotic give-and-take of energy flow.

For example, in a person suffering from an excessive amount of fear, lower back pain will require quite a bit of patience and support from the practitioner. Before the treatment begins, let the client know you can stop at any time if they are uncomfortable. Also, you can sit the client up at any time to discuss how they are feeling and to check in to see if they are OK with how the treatment is progressing. Empower the person to speak at any time.

Beginning the treatment on full floats is very beneficial here. Use extra floatation under the lower back for support. Movements must be very slow and cautious of any sudden jerking. Sudden movements will often cause the person to lift their head out of the water and stare at you. This will change their level of buoyancy, often sinking their lower back into the water and possibly submerging their nose - in essence losing trust with you. To bring the trust back, focus pressure on the center of the person's hands and feet.

Once the trust is established, you will feel the person's body start to let go and then you can start to get more dynamic with movement and eventually bring the client off the floats. It is important that the person still feels your support, so hold them fairly firm to start and close to your body. Resting their head on your shoulder for lower back decompression is great here.

Have respectful pacing, and the client may begin to cry. Hold the space for them as the water will magnify the emotional release. At the end of the session make sure you dock the client fully supported on the wall and let them engage in conversation when they are ready.

Key acupoints to help with grounding this emotional fear are located on the hand - on the web between the thumb and index finger, in combination with the space between the big toe and second toe.

Some examples of treatment with AI for independent causes of lower pain can vary when bringing the client into the pool. Here are some general guidelines to follow:

If a person has had surgery, wait for a minimum of three months recovery time before applying firm pressure to the surgical site. There must not be any open lesions, otherwise there will be a risk of infection.

If there is an acute injury, use ice for the first 48 hours, then alternate hot and cold. Gentle massage is recommended for lower back problems that have deficiency at the root. Gentle pressure is tonifying and firm pressure is draining.

Rocking or rebounding is recommended for tight bodies if there is no underlying disc issue. It helps to increase the fluidity and gliding of the joints.

Incorporating myofascial release and traction is safe for the majority of people. Traction is great for compression situations unless there is internal hardware and cases of hip replacements. Extreme caution should be used in cases where the vertebrae has been removed and only scar tissue is holding the back together.

Aquatic Integration is excellent for all back pain situations because being in the water takes the forces of gravity out of the situation, which in turn takes a lot of the pressure off of the pain receptors. Also, water is the element for the kidneys and will help to balance and nourish them when suspended in body temperature.

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With all new clients it is very important to get information about old injuries and time frames. Even if they had an injury 20 years ago, it may still be affecting the person. At any age, the person can be healing trauma that happened at birth.

If the injury is left untreated, there will be a lot of scar tissue or restrictions in the body. Scar tissue continues to grow under the skin like a spider's web and can cause a lot of pain - distal to where the original injury was. In these cases, always enter the body slowly and be patient with release. The AI principle of waiting and weighting is really effective for long standing issues. It allows the elastocollagenous barriers in the body to stretch and open.

Often, there can be a vasomotor response in the body which acts like a guide to where to treat next. This means that the skin will turn red where there is restriction, and that the red area needs to be addressed because it is connected to the root of the problem. It's like pulling a thread on a sweater.

There are cases where working local to the lower back is contraindicated and can aggravate the situation. An example of this is lower back pain as a result of surgery with the removal of lumbar vertebrae. The client will get the most relief if you work on the lateral calves, hamstrings, ITB and glutes. The scar tissue is keeping the person upright and working directly on it adds too much compression on the nerves. As well, you don't want to break up the scar tissue.

Often with lower back pain there is some kind of a twist, either in the pelvis or directly in the lumbar vertebrae. When releasing twists in the body the result is often realignment pain. Be clear with communication in that this is good pain and often will only last 3 days. This is also commonly known as therapeutic chaos, where cellular memory is being brought to the surface to process and let go.

After the treatment is complete, remind the client to hydrate more than usual. This will facilitate in flushing toxins, hydrate the nerves for better conduction and replenish the fluids that may have been lost from being in the water.

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Now that everything is loose and the person is feeling really good, it's good to mention when they get out of the water that gravity may bring back the pain and that this is normal. They should be careful with bending to put their clothes on, really sticking out their bottom to engage the quads and hamstrings and not bending at the waist. It will take a bit to break old bending habits but being conscious of it is the first step.

Empower the person to be really mindful of their body mechanics:

Good posture will keep nice curvature of the back and take off excess pressure on nerves. Sit with both feet even on the floor, not with crossed legs. It requires less muscle and energy from the body to have good posture. Strengthening core and abdominal muscles will reduce strain on the lower back. If the core and ab muscles are weak, the lower back will pick up the slack.

Swing your arms when walking. This will keep the pelvis in a good position and the pelvic wheels in motion. Toe sandals can help here, or the practice of separating the toes to achieve Yoga toes helps with the gate of the body. Use a pillow behind the lower back when driving or sitting for long periods of time. Stand as often as possible and gently move the hips from side to side, forward and back.

Improve flexibility to put equal load throughout the body from head to feet. Use caution with braces - they should only be used for 15 minutes during strenuous activity or heavy lifting. Any longer and the stabilizing muscles will weaken.

Sleep in neutral positions. Back-sleepers should put a pillow under their knees, side-sleepers should put a pillow between their knees, and stomach-sleepers should be informed that the neck twist that happens sleeping face down will cause stress to the lower back.

Be patient and kind with yourself. Impatience will only aggravate the situation. Recommend talk therapy to help with emotional stress back pain.

The use of meditation, deep breathing, Qi Gong, Tai Qi and Yoga are always beneficial when paired with positive affirmations. Some easy-to-remember affirmations are: I survived, I love myself, I have confidence, and it's OK to be fully healed now.

Frequent treatments alternating between specific and general will speed up the healing process.

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In conclusion, there are many reasons why people suffer from lower back pain. TCM allows for specific differentiation, while the dynamic availability of treatment from AI allows the client to heal harmoniously on physical, emotional, and spiritual levels. Treatment in a liquid three-dimensional medium allows for issues to be brought to the surface and addressed in a gentle therapeutic manner.

Claudia began her alternative healing arts journey about 16 years ago in Rossland, B.C., with an acupressure course at the Canadian Healing Arts Institute. This spurred her interest in traditional Chinese medicine. She then took the full doctorate program in Nelson, B.C., at the Academy of Classical Oriental Sciences. Claudia graduated in 2003, and within a few years, she had the opportunity to work at and co-own Mountain Waters Spa - a well-rounded spa and wellness centre in the heart of the Kootenays that had a custom-built warm water Watsu pool. Claudia enjoyed eight wonderful years at Mountain Waters Spa and became skilled at warm water therapies, which included Watsu and Aquatic Integration. About a year-and-a-half ago, Claudia left the spa to begin her own business where she specializes in combination treatments of Traditional Chinese Medicine and acupuncture, with myofascial release and massage. Claudia's future goal is to build own her own pool and small treatment centre where she can combine warm water therapies with land treatments for a fully balanced and dynamic healing experience.