Have you ever noticed that some illnesses are seasonal? It is indeed true that certain illnesses tend to flare in one season or another, primarily as a result of climatic factors such as temperature, humidity, etc. In Chinese Medicine (CM) we like to use these seasonal fluctuations to our advantage, and one way we do this is to treat “winter illnesses” (illnesses that worsen in the cold winter months) during the summer. This is called, “Winter Illness, Summer Treatment,” or 冬病夏治 in Chinese.

The theory goes something like this: Certain illnesses are aggravated by the cold of winter because they contain an element of “cold” in their etiology. If we try to treat these illnesses in the depths of winter, when cold is fierce and the illness is at its worst, we will have difficulty removing this “cold”, and be preoccupied with controlling the aggravated symptoms of the disease. Consequently, it is more difficult to eliminate the root of the problem- the “cold”. If, on the other hand, we treat during the warm months of summer, when there is absence of environmental cold and symptoms of the illness are milder, we can more easily remove this “cold” from the body, thus addressing the root of the problem. In this way, many winter illnesses can be successfully treated.

This method is commonly used to treat asthma, but can be applied to any illness or symptom that worsens with exposure to cold, including Raynaud’s disease, osteoarthritis, bone spurs, back pain, joint pain, sinusitis, weak immune system (easily catching colds), chronic bronchitis, stomach pain, chronic diarrhea, painful menstruation, etc., or even simple aversion to cold.

Furthermore, because “yang” (heat, light, activity, etc.) is dominant during summer, an opportunity is provided to fortify and strengthen the “yang qi” of the body. Therefore, this theory can be applied to special food, herbal, and moxibustion (a type of heat therapy) treatments for anyone wishing to strengthen their constitution, improve general well-being, and extend longevity.

So, whether suffering from a “winter illness” or simply wishing to improve health and longevity, the theories behind “Winter Illness, Summer Treatment” have something to offer us all.