

What can you tell from a tongue?

Tongue Diagnosis provides a clear contribution to overall diagnosis in Chinese Medicine. Here's a look at how it fits in with other information, what you can tell from a tongue and how it relates to treatment.

Gathering Information

Your first session with a Traditional Acupuncturist, like myself, is usually quite lengthy. I allow 90 minutes for most initial appointments* with about half that time set aside for gathering information and half for the treatment itself. Alongside understanding the problem with which you are seeking help, whether it is headaches, low mood, anxiety, period pain, fertility, tiredness, eczema or something else, it is important to get a picture of the background against which it has arisen and a more rounded picture of your health and wellbeing. Digestion, sleep, your monthly cycle for women, reactions to heat and cold and feelings, among other things, all contribute to a holistic diagnosis. Also important is the context - your life and lifestyle, what is working well and supporting you and what is not.

Two additional contributions to the overall diagnosis and hence direction of treatment are pulse and tongue diagnosis. Pulse diagnosis is subjective and is easily affected by what is going on at that moment or that day. Tongue diagnosis gives a more objective clear picture and provides a very reliable contribution to your diagnosis and subsequent treatment strategy. I will almost always ask you to stick out your tongue, although I know that might seem a little odd!

What do I look for on the tongue?

The tongue gives a glimpse of your insides and although it is a part of the digestive system it gives clues that relate to the whole body. It can of course be affected by diseases of the tongue itself and also affected by medication but here I am focussing on situations where they are not influences. A healthy tongue is pink with a very thin white coating.

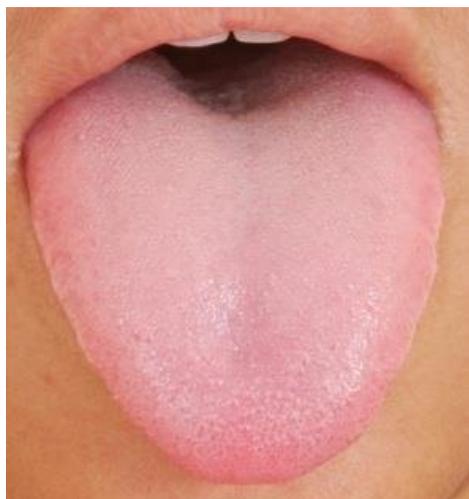


Fig 1 A generally healthy looking tongue. Even this healthy tongue gives some clues – there is slight swelling indicated by the dip in the centre and toothmarks at the edges.

When I look at your tongue I am observing several aspects which include:

- The Tongue Body (the tongue itself beneath the coating) - the colour, shape, texture and movements.
- The Tongue Coating - the colour, thickness and consistency.
- Points and Spots - their colour and size (distinct from the normal taste buds)
- Cracks and fissures
- Areas of the tongue and their correlation with parts of the body – see Fig 2.

How do these relate to physiology?

Some aspects of the tongue give clear indications on their own, but generally it is the combined information that provides insight and gives meaning.

So, for example, the tongue body colour (ranging from pale to deep red) gives information about relative heat and cold in the body, also about the state of the blood and whether it is well nourished. Spots on the tongue (red or white) and the colour of the coating (white, to various shades of yellow and even black) give further clarity to influences of heat and cold. A very slight purplish tinge to the tongue, whether on a pale or red tongue generally indicates some stagnation.

The relative moisture of the tongue gives the most direct indication of internal body fluids which is further refined by the relative shape of the tongue and the consistency of the coating. A very wet, swollen tongue, with a thick greasy coating is usually a sign that body fluids have accumulated which hampers function by congesting and blocking. A thin, dry tongue with no coating may indicate a deficit in fluids which hampers function through lack of lubrication and nourishment.

Cracks and fissures are more complex and can mean different things depending on their location, appearance and other aspects of the tongue, but are often associated with a depletion of body fluids and also with heat.

Different areas of the tongue also relate to different parts of the body. If we divide the tongue roughly into thirds, the front portion relates to the chest area, the middle third to the digestive organs above the navel, and the rear third to the area below the navel.

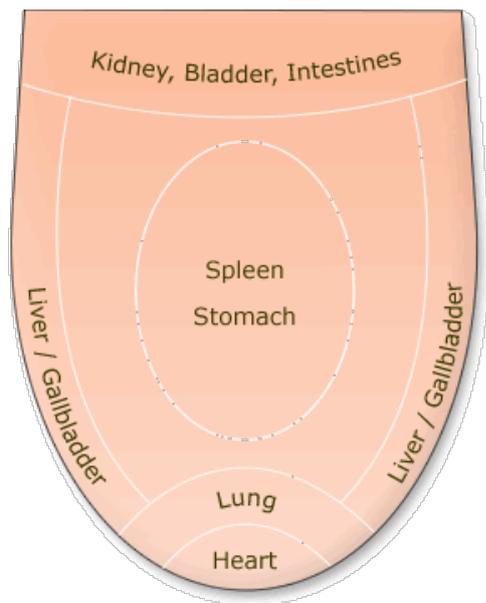


Fig 2 Areas of the tongue as they relate to organs. Note: These are the organs as they are understood in Chinese Medicine and don't relate exactly to the physical organs although there is considerable overlap.

It is worth noting that the Spleen in Chinese Medicine includes pancreatic function, so is very closely connected with digestion. The reproductive organs, especially in women, are influenced by findings in all areas of the tongue despite their location below the navel.

Putting it all together.

Traditional Acupuncturists seek out the patterns that weave signs and symptoms together and treatment is focused on bringing harmony, so that everything works together more supportively. In doing so we aim to improve your health overall, including of course the main issue that you are seeking help with. An important part of treatment is also working out what factors are influencing and contributing to the imbalances, so that they too can be addressed.

Almost without exception the picture painted by gathering together all the signs and symptoms will not be textbook patterns, but an individualised interaction of the patterns, sometimes with some contradictions and some patterns masking others. Everyone is different and at times the picture can be very confusing. The tongue can give real clarity and help to prioritize treatment and the most important factors to focus on. Over time the effects of treatment are reflected in the tongue.

It really is an invaluable tool and it is amazing how different each tongue is. So, when I ask you to stick out your tongue, please don't be shy!

*The exception would be when treating a simple muscle or joint problem, like an ankle sprain, where going into your background health and looking at things from a more holistic perspective is not as important. An hour is then usually long enough for the first session, but I may still ask to see your tongue as it can still be helpful.