

# The Diagnosis & Treatment of Adrenal Fatigue Syndrome According to Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM)

by  
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(This article is adapted from the contents of Dr. Sam C. Liang's presentation delivered at the seminar "Traditional Chinese Medicine for Adrenal Fatigue" hosted by the Oriental Healing Arts Institute (OHAI) in Irvine, CA on June 13th, 2010.)

## Introduction

Adrenal fatigue is a type of syndrome caused by the decreased function of the adrenal glands. This syndrome is caused by prolonged periods of overwork, nervousness, stress, and pressure from daily life. It may also be triggered by acute or chronic infections, including respiratory disorders, such as the common cold, bronchitis, or pneumonia. This type of fatigue persists even with rest or sleep.

Adrenal fatigue patients will feel like they are in a constant state of illness, lethargic or "feeling gray". Suffering this type of listlessness, they become dependent on coffee, caffeine or other stimulants to get through the day. Adrenal fatigue syndrome is also referred

to as non-Addison hypoadrenia, sub-clinical neurasthenia, and adrenal apathy. Millions of people in the United States and throughout the world suffer adrenal fatigue.

There are eight types of differential diagnosis for "Adrenal Fatigue Syndrome" according to TCM:

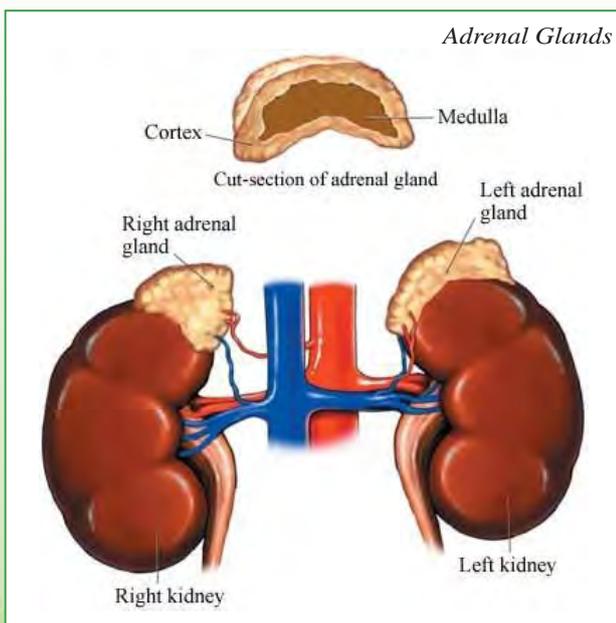
1. Kidney *Yin* deficiency
2. Kidney *Yang* deficiency
3. Kidney *Yin* & *Yang* deficiency
4. Kidney *Qi* deficiency
5. Miscommunication between Heart and Kidneys
6. Liver & Kidney *Yin* deficiency
7. Spleen & Kidney *Yang* deficiency
8. Lung and Kidney *Yin* deficiency

## The TCM Diagnosis & Treatment of Adrenal Fatigue Syndrome

### 1. Kidney *Yin* Deficiency

Kidney *Yin* becomes injured by overwork, chronic illness, late-stage Kidney patterns, or following febrile disease<sup>1</sup>. As a result, deficient Kidney fire flares and the excessive heat damages Kidney *Yin* and fluids.

Clinical signs and symptoms include five-center heat, insomnia with night sweats, dry mouth, sore throat, heel pain, low back soreness, beng luo<sup>2</sup>, a red tongue body, and a thin, rapid pulse.



## 1.1 Treatment of Kidney Yin Deficiency with Insomnia

### ■ Signs & Symptoms

This pattern is caused by over-thinking. Excessive over-thinking leads to Kidney Yin/Essence deficiency and flaring of Heart fire. The signs and symptoms are palpitation, insomnia, random/bizarre dreams, five-center heat, dizziness, and tinnitus.

### ■ Treatment Principle

Because the kidney is deficient, its water is unable to nourish the Heart's fire and insomnia results. Treatment includes replenishing Kidney water to subdue the deficiency fire and, calming and stabilizing the spirit<sup>3</sup>.

### ■ Recommended Herbal Formulas:

The following formulas are combined together and taken 3 times during a day after each meal with warm water.

Chinese	English	Pin-yin
左歸丸	Achyranthes & Rehmannia Formula	Zuo Gui Wan
還少丹	Lycium Formula	Huan Shao Dan
知柏地黃丸	Anemarrhena, Phellodendron & Rehmannia Formula	Zhi Bo Di Huang Wan

The following formulas are combined together and taken 2 hours before bed or immediately after dinner with warm water.

Chinese	English	Pin-yin
六味地黃丸	Rehmannia Six Formula	Liu Wei Di Huang Wan
黃連阿膠湯	Coptis & Gelatin Combination	Huang Lian E Jiao Tang



## 1.2 Treatment of Kidney Yin Deficiency with Fatigue

### ■ Signs & Symptoms

The body is thin and emaciated, low-grade fever, dizziness with tinnitus and deafness, weakness in the legs, and lusterless facial color.

### ■ Recommended Herbal Formulas:

The following formulas are combined together and taken 3 times a day after each meal with warm water.

Chinese	English	Pin-yin
左歸丸	Achyranthes & Rehmannia Formula	Zuo Gui Wan
益氣聰明湯	Ginseng, Astragalus & Pueraria Combination	Yi Qi Cong Ming Tang
人參養榮湯	Ginseng Nutritive Combination	Ren Shen Yang Rong Tang

### ■ Treatment Principle

Tonify and nourish Kidney Yin.

## 2. Kidney Yang Deficiency

The body is unable to warm up the *Zang-fu* organ because of deficiency of the primordial yang<sup>4</sup> which results in dampness and water retention in the body as well as decreased function of the reproductive system. This is due to overwork, aging-induced Kidney deficiency, or chronic diseases.

Clinical signs and symptoms include cold signs such as white and pale face, cold and soreness of the low back, abundant clear urine or retention of urine, edema (especially below the waist), erectile dysfunction, premature ejaculation, excessive vaginal discharge, infertility due to coldness in the uterus, pale tongue body with a white coat, deep thin pulse at the *Chi* position or a deep hesitant pulse.

### 2.1 Treatment of Kidney Yang Deficiency with Fatigue

#### ■ Signs & Symptoms

Interior cold causes watery diarrhea with undigested food, abundant clear urine, sore upper and low back, premature ejaculation, erectile dysfunction, and weight gain, especially around the waist, that is hard to lose.

#### ■ Treatment Principle

Warm *Shen Men* (神門), tonify the essence and blood.



#### ■ Recommended Herbal Formulas:

The following formulas are combined together and taken 3 times a day after each meal with warm water.

Chinese	English	Pin-yin
右歸丸	Eucommia & Rehmannia Formula	<i>You Gui Wan</i>
龜鹿二仙膠	Tortoise Shell & Deer Horn Formula	<i>Gui Lu Er Xian Jiao</i>
還少丹	Lycium Formula	<i>Huan Shao Dan</i>
鹿茸	Deer Antler	<i>Lu Rong</i>

### 2.2 Treatment of Kidney Yang Deficiency with Water Retention/Swelling

#### ■ Signs & Symptoms

Edema of the whole body, pitting edema especially below the waist, scanty urine, low back pain, cold stagnation affecting the limbs, and a pale flabby tongue body with teeth marks.

#### ■ Treatment Principle

Warm the Kidneys, move the *Qi* and promote water movement.

#### ■ Recommended Herbal Formulas:

The following formulas are combined together and taken 3 times a day after each meal with warm water.

Chinese	English	Pin-yin
溫賦湯(真武湯)	Vitality Combination	<i>Wen Fu Tang (Zhen Wu Tang)</i>
導水茯苓湯	Hoelen, Atractylodes & Areca Combination	<i>Dao Shui Fu Ling Tang</i>

### 3. Kidney Yin & Yang Deficiency

The body to be unable to nourish the organs and meridians due to and insufficiency of Kidney *Yang* complicated with injured *Yin* and essence. Both internal and external factors such as overwork, late or end-stage of chronic disease which affects the Kidneys contribute to this condition.

Clinical signs and symptoms include “shrimp sleeping”, hot palms and soles, dry mouth and throat, favoring hot or warm drinks, vertigo, tinnitus, low back soreness and weakness, abundant clear urination, urine retention, erectile dysfunction and premature ejaculating in males, infertility and increase of vaginal discharge in females, a flabby red tongue body with a white coating, and a thin and weak pulse in the *Chi* position.

#### 3.1 Kidney Yang and Yin Deficiency with Guan Ge Disorder<sup>6</sup>

##### ■ Signs & Symptoms

Nausea and vomiting, scanty urine or urinary difficulties, edema, dark facial hue, extreme lack of energy, listlessness, dry mouth, a flabby pale red tongue body, and a white coating.

##### ■ Treatment Principle

To tonify and soothe *Yang*, dissipate turbidity, nourish *Yin* and benefit the water.

##### ■ Recommended Herbal Formulas:

The following formulas are combined together and taken 3 times a day after each meal with warm water.

Chinese	English	Pin-yin
濟生腎氣丸	Achyranthes & Plantago Formula	Ji Sheng Shen Qi Wan
豬苓湯	Polyporus Combination	Zhu Ling Tang



Rehmannia  
(Di Huang)

#### 3.2 Treatment of Kidney Yang and Yin Deficiency with Fatigue

##### ■ Signs & Symptoms

Aversion to cold, hot palms and soles, dry throat, preference for warm drinks, vertigo, tinnitus, soreness and weakness of the lower back, erectile dysfunction, premature ejaculation, infertility, low blood pressure, low blood sugar, constantly tired or in a semiconscious state, uncontrollable craving for salty or sweet foods.

##### ■ Treatment Principle

To tonify and nourish both *Yang* and *Yin*.



Astragalus  
(Huang Qi)

## Recommended Herbal Formulas:

The following formulas are combined together and taken 3 times a day after each meal with warm water.

Chinese	English	Pin-yin
右歸丸	Eucommia & Rehmannia Formula	<i>You Gui Wan</i>
左歸丸	Achyranthes & Rehmannia Formula	<i>Zuo Gui Wan</i>
鹿茸	Deer Antler	<i>Lu Rong</i>

Or the following formulas are combined together and taken 3 times a day after each meal with warm water.

Chinese	English	Pin-yin
參茸固本丸	Ginseng & Antler Pills	<i>Shen Rong Gu Ben Wan</i>
還少丹	Lycium Formula	<i>Huan Shao Dan</i>
補中益氣湯	Ginseng & Astragalus Combination	<i>Bu Zhong Yi Qi Tang</i>

## 4. Kidney Qi Deficiency

Kidney *Qi* deficiency is mostly due to deficient pre-heaven *Qi*, overwork, or chronic disease. This is due to severe depletion of the Kidney *Qi*, leading to decreased Kidney function.

Clinical signs and symptoms include decreased hearing acuity, day-dreaming, deafness, dizziness, lightheadedness, blurred vision, soreness and weakness of the low back, nocturia, premature ejaculation, pale tongue body with a white coating, and a thin, weak pulse.

### 4.1 Treatment of Kidney Qi Deficiency with Fatigue

#### Signs & Symptoms

Dizziness, tinnitus, decrease in hearing acuity, soreness and weakness of the low back, mild depression and decrease in sex drive, constantly feeling unhealthy, and a prolonged recovery time from infections.

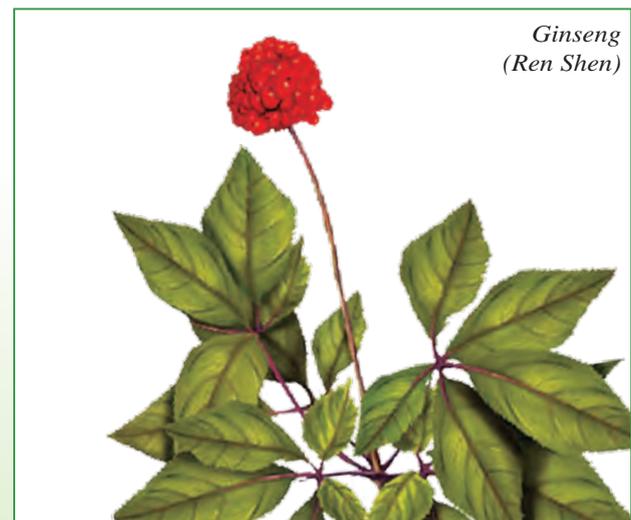
#### Treatment Principle

To tonify Kidneys.

#### Recommended Herbal Formulas:

The following formulas are combined together and taken 3 times a day after each meal with warm water.

Chinese	English	Pin-yin
滋腎通耳湯	Scute Ear Combination	<i>Zhi Shen Tong Er Tang</i>
右歸丸	Eucommia & Rehmannia Formula	<i>You Gui Wan</i>
補中益氣湯	Ginseng & Astragalus Combination	<i>Bu Zhong Yi Qi Tang</i>
大防風湯	Major Siler Combination	<i>Da Fang Feng Tang</i>



Ginseng  
(Ren Shen)

## 5. Miscommunication between Kidneys & Heart

This is due to chronic disease, overwork, over indulgence in sexual activity, or extreme emotions leading to depletion of Kidney water. Insufficient water fails to control Heart fire. Heart *Yin* becomes deficient leading to the flaring up of Heart deficiency fire. This along with Kidney water deficiency results in miscommunication between Kidneys and Heart.

Clinical signs and symptoms include irritability, insomnia, upper back and neck pain of unknown origin, lots of dreams, premature ejaculation, soreness of the lower back, leg weakness, hot flashes with spontaneous sweating, vertigo, tinnitus, palpitation, dry throat, nocturia, red tongue body with scanty or no coating, pulse is thin and rapid.

### 5.1 Treatment of Miscommunication between Heart & Kidneys with Insomnia

#### ■ Signs & Symptoms

This pattern is due to overwork which causes deficiency with insufficient Kidney water that leads to Heart fire blazing. The signs and symptoms include deficiency induced irritability and insomnia, excessive dreaming, 5-center heat, dry mouth, insufficient saliva, upper back or neck pain along with dizziness, tinnitus, and palpitation.

#### ■ Treatment Principle

To benefit and strengthen water to control fire, nourish *Yin*, and clear heat.

#### ■ Recommended Herbal Formulas:

The following formulas are combined together and taken 3 times a day after each meal with warm water.

Chinese	English	Pin-yin
黃連阿膠湯	Coptis & Gelatin Combination	<i>Huang Lian E Jiao Tang</i>
葛根湯	Pueraria Combination	<i>Ge Gen Tang</i>
養心湯	Astragalus & Zizyphus Combination	<i>Yang Xin Tang</i>

The following formulas are combined together and taken after dinner with warm water.

Chinese	English	Pin-yin
葛根湯	Pueraria Combination	<i>Ge Gen Tang</i>
酸棗仁湯	Zizyphus Combination	<i>Suan Zao Ren Tang</i>
補中益氣湯	Ginseng & Astragalus Combination	<i>Bu Zhong Yi Qi Tang</i>
六味地黃丸	Rehmannia Six Formula	<i>Liu Wei Di Huang Wan</i>



## 6. Liver & Kidney Yin Deficiency

This is due to “Kidney Yin deficiency leading to Liver Yin deficiency” or “Liver Yin deficiency leading to depletion of Kidney Yin”. In clinical practice Kidney and Liver Yin are often both severely deficient. This condition is mostly due to chronic illness, overwork, or warm febrile disease injuring Liver and Kidney Yin. Clinical signs and symptoms include blurred vision, numbness, dry and brittle nails, flank pain,

vertigo, tinnitus, brittle hair with split ends, thin and emaciated body, dry throat and mouth, deficient-induced irritability with inability to stay still (especially in the morning or between 3-5 pm, along with a feeling of weakness of the entire body, frequently feeling of listlessness and fatigue around 9-10 pm but is unable to fall asleep or willing to go to bed), yellow urine, dry stool, red tongue body with scanty coating or no coating, deep, wiry, thin and rapid pulse.

### 6.1 Liver & Kidney Yin Deficiency with Fatigue & Vertigo

#### ■ Signs & Symptoms

Soreness and weakness of the low back, vertigo, tinnitus, blurred vision, decreased visual acuity, loose teeth, brittle hair, and Qi and Blood deficiency symptoms of all other Zang-fu

organs in the body.

#### ■ Treatment Principle

To benefit, nourish, and tonify Liver and Kidneys.



#### ■ Recommended Herbal Formulas:

The following formulas are combined together and taken 3 times a day after each meal with warm water.

Chinese	English	Pin-yin
七寶美髯丹	Multiflorum & Lycium Formula	Qi Bao Mei Ran Dan
葛根湯	Pueraria Combination	Ge Gen Tang
龜鹿二仙膠	Tortoise Shell & Deer Horn Formula	Gui Lu Er Xian Jiao

### 6.2 Treatment of Liver & Kidney Deficiency with Vertigo

#### ■ Signs & Symptoms

Mild vertigo due to deficiency that can be relieved by laying down and closing the eyes and is accompanied by other Liver and Kidney deficiency symptoms. This is mostly due to deficiency of Kidney water since the water cannot nourish wood. Liver Yang rises and creates wind, which causes vertigo and

dizziness. Another problem is Liver and Kidney Yin/Essence depletion that is unable to regenerate fluids.

#### ■ Treatment Principle

To benefit, and regulate Liver and Kidneys, nourish the blood and regulate menses.



#### ■ Recommended Herbal Formulas:

The following formulas are combined together and taken 3 times a day after each meal with warm water.

Chinese	English	Pin-yin
杞菊地黃丸	Lycium, Chrysanthemum & Rehmannia Formula	Qi Ju Di Huang Wan
天麻鈎藤飲	Gastrodia & Uncaria Combination	Tian Ma Gou Teng Yin
龜鹿二仙膠	Tortoise Shell & Deer Horn Formula	Gui Lu Er Xian Jiao

## 6.3 Treatment of Kidney & Liver Yin Deficiency Related to the Menses in Females

### ■ Signs & Symptoms

This is due to Liver and Kidney Yin deficiency, unable to control Liver Yang. Liver Yang then rises to the head, causing distending headaches, red face, irritability, anxious, increased PMS signs and symptoms (heavy menstrual flow up until Day 4 and stops or the flow pauses and starts up again for 1 day on Day 5 or 6).

### ■ Treatment Principle

To benefit, and regulate Liver and Kidneys, nourish the blood and regulate menses.

### ■ Recommended Herbal Formulas:

The following formulas are combined together and taken 3 times a day after each meal with warm water.

Chinese	English	Pin-yin
加味逍遙散	Bupleurum & Peony Formula	<i>Jia Wei Xiao Yao San</i>
芎歸膠艾湯	Dang Gui & Gelatin Combination	<i>Xiong Gui Jiao Ai Tang</i>
吳茱萸湯	Evodia Combination	<i>Wu Zhu Yu Tang</i>

Or the following formulas are combined together and taken 3 times a day after each meal with warm water.

Chinese	English	Pin-yin
吳茱萸湯	Evodia Combination	<i>Wu Zhu Yu Tang</i>
知柏地黃丸	Anemarrhena, Phellodendron & Rehmannia Formula	<i>Zhi Bo Di Huang Wan</i>
逍遙散	Dang Gui & Bupleurum Formula	<i>Xiao Yao San</i>



## 7. Spleen & Kidney Yang Deficiency

This is due to the combination of Spleen Yang insufficiency and Kidney Yang deficiency. If the disorder is due to the diseases of the Spleen with Kidney deficiency, signs and symptoms of Spleen Yang deficiency would be more prominent. Moreover, if the disorder is due to the diseases of the Kidney and Spleen deficiency, signs and symptoms of Kidney Yang deficiency would be more prominent. In this scenario, we are talking about “the disease of the Spleen with Kidney deficiency”, which leads to internal cold and decrease of the Spleen’s transformation function causing water

retention.

Clinical signs and symptoms include cold limbs, pale face, thin and emaciated body, tired spirit, coldness and pain in the lower abdomen, intermittent constipation and diarrhea with undigested food, diarrhea, lower back soreness, cold knees, abundant clear urination, nocturia or unsmooth urination, edema/swelling of the face and the limbs, erectile dysfunction, premature ejaculation, coldness in the uterus in females leading to infertility, excessive clear vaginal discharge, pale, flabby tongue body with teeth marks, pulse is deep, slow, thin, and weak.

## 7.1 Treatment of Spleen & Kidney Yang Deficiency with Fatigue

### ■ Signs & Symptoms

This is due to a decrease of the transformation function of spleen leading to poor appetite, loose stool or diarrhea, or intermittent diarrhea with constipation. Long term diarrhea will drain the body and the patient will become weak and fatigued. If Kidney Yang deficiency is due to insufficient pre-heaven energy or irregularity in diets and activities leading to deficient post-heaven energy, Kidney Yang will be unable to rise and warm Spleen Yang, causing Spleen's

transformation function to become impaired. This will lead to symptoms of low appetite, emaciation, and tired spirit.

### ■ Treatment Principle

To benefit, warm and tonify Spleen and Kidneys. If Spleen deficiency is predominant, emphasize tonifying the Spleen. If Kidney deficiency is more predominant, emphasize tonifying the Kidneys. In either circumstance apply tonification both the Spleen and Kidneys.

### ■ Recommended Herbal Formulas:

The following formulas are combined together and taken 3 times a day after each meal with warm water.  
(Indication: Diarrhea or intermittent diarrhea)

Chinese	English	Pin-yin
附子理中湯	Aconite, Ginseng & Ginger Combination	Fu Zi Li Zhong Tang
右歸丸	Eucommia & Rehmannia Formula	You Gui Wan
四神丸	Psoralea & Nutmeg Formula	Si Shen Wan

Or the following formulas are combined together and taken 3 times a day after each meal with warm water.  
(Indication: Diarrhea or intermittent diarrhea)

Chinese	English	Pin-yin
參苓白朮散	Ginseng & Atractylodes Formula	Shen Ling Bai Zhu San
右歸丸	Eucommia & Rehmannia Formula	You Gui Wan
四神丸	Psoralea & Nutmeg Formula	Si Shen Wan

The following formulas are combined together and taken 3 times a day after each meal with warm water.  
(Indication: Intermittent constipation)

Chinese	English	Pin-yin
右歸丸	Eucommia & Rehmannia Formula	You Gui Wan
麻子仁丸	Apricot Seed & Linum Formula	Ma Zi Ren Wan
潤腸丸	Linum & Rhubarb Combination	Run Chang Wan
八珍湯	Dang Gui & Ginseng Eight Combination	Ba Zhen Tang



## 8. Lung & Kidney Yin Deficiency

Lung Yin is deficient due to overtiredness along with Kidney Yin deficiency leading to Lung and Kidney Yin and fluids insufficiency. As water becomes deficient there is flaring up of deficient fire.

Clinical signs and symptoms include frequent colds or other respiratory infections that tend to linger, cough with scanty sputum or blood-tinged sputum, dry mouth and throat, hoarse voice, irritability, restlessness, red tongue body, and thin, rapid pulse.

### 8.1 Treatment of Lung & Kidney Yin Deficiency with Cough Disorders

#### ■ Signs & Symptoms

Prolonged pathogenic heat injuring the Lungs leading to Kidney Yin deficiency, especially due to frequent colds or other respiratory infections that lingers, cough with scanty sputum or blood-tinged sputum especially at night, dryness of the mouth and throat, red tongue body with scanty coating, and a thin pulse.

#### ■ Treatment Principle

Benefit, nourish, and tonify Kidney Yin, moisten the Lungs, and stop cough.

#### ■ Recommended Herbal Formulas:



The following formulas are combined together and taken 3 times a day after each meal with warm water.

Chinese	English	Pin-yin
七味都氣丸	Rehmannia & Schizandra Formula	Qi Wei Du Qi Wan
玉屏風散	Siler & Astragalus Formula	Yu Ping Feng San
百合固金湯	Lily Combination	Bai He Gu Jin Tang
清燥救肺湯	Eriobotrya & Ophiopogon Combination	Qing Zao Jui Fei Tang

The following formulas are combined together and taken 3 times a day after each meal with warm water.  
(Indication: For Lung deficiency with chronic cough and blood-tinged sputum)

Chinese	English	Pin-yin
生脈散	Ginseng, Schizandra & Ophiopogon Formula	Sheng Mai San
金水六君子煎	Six-Gentleman of Metal & Water Decoction	Jin Shui Liu Jun Zi Jian
紫菀湯	Aster Combination	Zi Wan Tang

#### Footnotes

1. 溫病, *Wen Bing*
2. 崩漏, *gushing-leaking syndrome*
3. 神, *Shen*
4. 元陽, *Yuan Yang*
5. *Sleeping with the body curled up in the fetal position*
6. 關格, *Guan Ge Disorder*