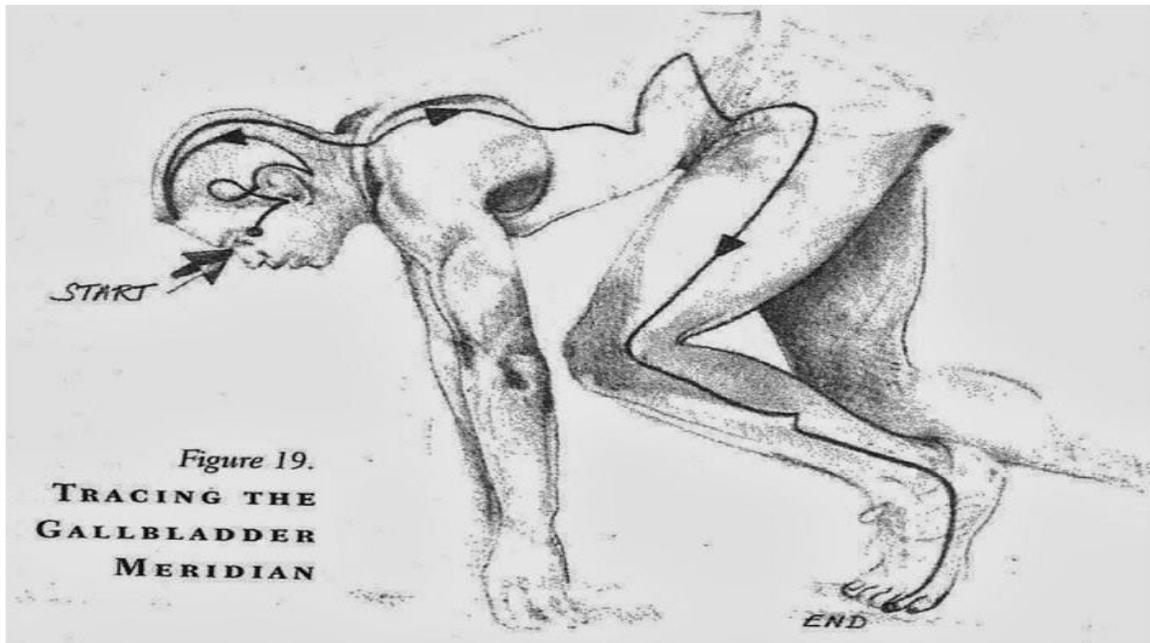


# Understanding Biliary Tension

By Chris Melmoth, LMT, EMT

The biliary system includes the liver, gall bladder, and bile ducts. It is now known in Western science that biliary health issues can cause reflex pain & tension into the upper back, neck, and head via the phrenic nerve. However, in Chinese Medicine, the Gall Bladder (in TCM represents the entire biliary system) is one of the longest meridians in the body, which means when it is out of balance it can reflex tension, weakness, pain & other sensations out to almost anywhere from the feet up to the head, making a wide range of areas weak and prone to injury.



This gall bladder tension is a circulatory “stagnation” in or around the biliary system that is most likely caused or exacerbated by a combination of...

- **Poor Diet:** Too much oxidized oil... grease, fried foods, any processed foods with oil in them, cooking oils, and adding any oxidized oils to food such as salads.
- **Stimulant Abuse:** Excessive amounts coffee or other forms of caffeine & stimulants, especially with lack of sleep, can cause a chronic sympathetic autonomic nervous system response (sympathetic dominance) in which the digestive organs shut down too often, leading to overly acidic bile and the formation of calcium oxylate crystals.
- **Emotional Stress:** Internalized frustrations, anger, and other negative emotions also can cause this sympathetic dominance resulting in digestive and reproductive organ stasis.
- **Estrogen Dominance:** Some people, usually women, genetically produce more estrogen than others. This normally is a good thing, giving women strength, endurance, and more capable reproductive abilities. But when not efficiently excreted out of the body (via the bile ducts) any excess estrogens or xenoestrogens can cause stagnation.
- **Tissue Restrictions:** The presence of stones, sludge, sand, or biomechanical imbalances, especially in combination with local inflammation, can result in scar tissue, adhesions, or other myofascial restriction in or around the biliary system.
- **Environmental Toxicity:** The daily presence of solvents, chemicals, or other pollutants that are overwhelming the livers ability to detoxify may also be a contributing factor.

I cannot tell you how often I see this issue. It almost always presents as scapular-neck pain & tension, often accompanied by headaches and skin conditions. These latter symptoms occur because when the biliary portals are congested, internal heat & fat-soluble chemicals do not flow efficiently through them and out of the body. They then get backed up in the system, where the body either stores them, or attempts to filter them out by other means via the kidneys, lungs, and skin. As internal heat & pressure builds, it rises, leading to skin discolorations & eruptions and headaches.

I have watched so many manual therapists try every trick in the book to try to release it for their patients. Although they do provide temporary relief, it is rare that the symptoms go away completely. The difficulty is that although the mechanism is well understood in Chinese medicine, and the scientific studies are actually out there, not many Western practitioners are aware of them or these physiological connections.

In Chinese Medicine, the liver governs the smooth flow of chi/circulation throughout the body. When it is sluggish, systemic blood and electrical flow are restricted. This leads to musculoskeletal stiffness & inflexibility especially along the spine and down into the hips and lateral sides of the thighs and legs. The skin is also commonly affected, causing chronic dryness, rashes, brown (liver) spots, and upper back, chest, or facial acne. Other issues associated with gall bladder meridian are diaphragmatic tension, nausea & upper digestive problems, gas & bloating, difficult menstruation, and abnormal tissue growths, such as tumors & endometriosis.

A very important concept to understand here is the relationship between the biliary system and women's reproductive health. One of the main jobs of the liver & gall bladder are to filter out fat-soluble waste products. This includes excess estrogens that the body produces, but does not use. These hormones normally are filtered through the biliary system, and then flushed out of the intestines. But when the system is overwhelmed, these hormones enter the tissue and cause abnormal growths and other health issues, such as swollen or painful breasts, cysts, tumors, cramping and heavy or thick bleeding upon menstruation, and endometriosis. Estrogen-dominant women in particular are more prone to these situations, since they naturally produce more estrogen than other women.

It is estimated that by middle age, the gall bladder is functioning at only 50% in most Americans. Of course as long as that greenish-brown color is present in the toilet, the body is still excreting bile. But this does not mean it is functioning optimally. It is common for muscular pain & tension to arise along the "gallbladder meridian" long before any serious symptoms occur.

During assessment, when you palpate the occiput you may feel heat radiating from it, and the GB20 acupoint will be extra sensitive & swollen, possibly referring pain to the forehead just above each eye. If you touch the gall bladder itself, it may make the client feel sharp pain or nausea discomfort due to bile "sludge", "sand", or "stones" in the area.

If there is significant pain in the lower right quadrant of the abdomen, I definitely would get the Western diagnosis and the ultrasound first. But just know that even if it turns out that there are no gallstones present, there still can be sand or sludge involved. This is not an emergency, but still needs to be addressed so as not to turn in to an emergency. If the stones are big enough, they likely will require surgery. If surgery is necessary, I would try to find a surgeon who can remove the stones without removing the gall bladder. They do exist. Make no mistake about it, the body will be much healthier and happier if the gall bladder is kept. And often, if there are gall bladder issues, there are liver & bile duct issues well. Sand that is in the bile ducts & veins, and the resulting scar tissue, may continue to create problems even after the gall bladder is removed.

Now, since biliary tension primarily is a biochemical and/or emotional issue, structural bodywork techniques will usually only provide temporary alleviation of symptoms. However it can be very relieving to the patient if the manual therapist releases the tension in the occiput, all around the scapula, and along the IT band. But unless the issue is purely due to structural restrictions, diet & lifestyle changes will be necessary for permanent relief. If gallstones are present, I generally would not recommend manual therapy on or around the gall bladder. If enough of a structural change is made, it could cause a stone to enter the bile duct, which can lead to severe pain and the need for immediate surgery.

After being cleared by the Doctor, the first thing the patient needs to do is adjust his/her diet and/or chemical environment, and begin taking astringent herbs, daily. Then the necessary actions need to be taken to reduce any daily frustrations at home or work. If the patient is on estrogen-based birth control, this most likely will need to be stopped, since a common side effect is thickened & clotted blood. This will be especially important if the patient is an estrogen-dominant woman. Symptoms should subside within a couple weeks of this, but it can take many months to really clean up these organs.

Adding “astringent” herbs, foods, and beverages (milk thistle, dandelion, turmeric, cats claw, bitter greens, pomegranate, sour apples, etc) that naturally thin out the blood in the liver can be very helpful. Chanca Piedra is a natural supplement that has the reputation of dissolving calcium oxalate (gallstones, kidney stones, etc). It is easily prepared as a tea, and can be purchased inexpensively online. Malic acid may also work, and comes in a tablet form. HepatoVen by Pemier Research Labs is an excellent herbal complex, and also can be purchased online. However special caution must be taken, especially if your blood is deficient or are already on any prescription blood-thinners. Systemic enzymes such as Wobenzym, and fermented foods (fibrinolytics) may be helpful in reducing any internal scar tissue.

There are many liver/gall bladder “cleanses” & “flushes” to choose from out there. Dr. Schulze formulas, for example, are very popular. But the ones that include daily supplementation of malic acid may be more effective. And coffee enemas also have traditionally been used for this purpose. These approaches can be very helpful, but it is necessary to understand that they must not be attempted when the body is under significant emotional stress. And if there has been a diagnosis of liver or gall bladder disease, you must not attempt these cleanses without first consulting with your primary healthcare provider. However, making the necessary relaxing lifestyle changes in combination with these supplements likely will be essential.

Now, I am not a doctor and this IS NOT a recommendation or prescription for you! I do not know your particular health situation, and therefore it is very important that you check with your doctor before using these products or techniques. It's also possible these interventions make you feel sick or create more discomfort, which can be a good sign that they are working, but may be a situation that should be guided and monitored by a qualified healthcare practitioner. My best suggestion is that you talk to your primary healthcare provider (family doctor) first, and then possibly see a Gastroenterologist. However if you have access to a Holistic Medical Doctor, this may be where you get the best advice & guidance, since many mainstream Doctors do not understand the deeper workings & treatments associated with the biliary system.