

Tongue Diagnosis

Tongue diagnosis is part of diagnosis by looking in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). It is considered a pillar of diagnosis because it provides clearly visible clues to a patient's pattern of disease. Since the tongue always reflects the basic, underlying pattern, it is extremely reliable, especially whenever there are conflicting manifestations. Whether practicing Western or Chinese herbalism, the tongue is a tremendous help in determining which herbs to prescribe in any given health imbalance.

Observation of the tongue is based on four areas: the tongue body color, the body shape, the coating and the moisture. Of these four, *the tongue body color is the most important* (except in acute conditions, when coat is most important) and its diagnostic indications help clarify the pattern of disease, especially when there are conflicting signs and symptoms. Tongue movement can also be a useful indicator as can the sublingual veins seen on the underside of the tongue when it's curled up. See the accompanying charts for the diagnostic indications for each of the above.

The body color indicates the condition of blood, qi, yin, yang, fluids and the yin organs (heart, spleen, lungs, kidneys and liver). As well, it shows any long-term pathological disharmonies in chronic diseases and the constitutional weaknesses. It is a reliable indicator of the underlying patterns of disharmony. The tongue body shape shows the state of blood, qi, yin, yang and fluids. It also reflects any persistent long-term pathologies, as these change the tongue shape.

The tongue coating points to the condition of the yang organs (small intestine, stomach, large intestine, urinary bladder and gall bladder) and the location of the illness. Its thickness reflects excess or deficient states. Overall, it's an important indicator in acute conditions. Tongue moisture designates the state of dampness or dryness in the body, while tongue movement indicates either the depletion of qi, or the presence of wind.

Each area of the tongue reflects the state of specific organs – the tip corresponds to the heart, the front to the lungs, the center to the spleen and stomach, the rear, first to the intestines, then going farther back to the bladder and uterus and then to the kidneys at the root, while the inside-sides correlates to the gall bladder and the edge-sides to the liver.

Tongue color, shape, coating and moisture may vary in each of these areas and thus indicates the condition of imbalance or health in those corresponding organs. For instance, if the tongue is pale on the sides, this indicates a lack of blood in the liver. If the tongue is purple in the center, this is blood stagnating in the stomach. If there's a thick yellow coat on the rear of the tongue, this indicates dampness and heat in the intestines, bladder or uterus.

A normal healthy tongue is pale-red in color, of medium thickness with a thin white coating and very slight moisture. (Note: sometimes a normal looking tongue reflects liver issues, especially liver qi stagnation.)

The tongue is best observed in outdoor light and no sooner than ½-1 hour after eating. If needed, use a flashlight to examine, preferably a halogen light;

otherwise, take into account any yellowish tinge cast by the light. Strange colors on the tongue usually reflect foods recently sucked or eaten. Have the person relax first before you look at it. The tongue should not be held out longer than twenty seconds at a time as the color changes quickly.

TONGUE BODY COLOR	
The tongue body color indicates the condition of blood, qi, yin, yang, fluids, the yin organs, the underlying patterns of disharmony, long-term pathological disharmonies and constitutional weakness.	
BODY COLOR	INDICATIONS
Pale	Deficient blood, especially if also thin and/or slightly dry deficient yang (coldness), especially if also swollen and wet
Red	Heat; if with a full coat (especially yellow), this designates an excess of heat; if with no coat (or a peeled coat), this indicates deficient yin (lack of body fluids); possible heat in the blood
Deep red	Same as red body color, only a more severe condition.
Purple	Stagnant blood; if reddish-purple, this indicates heat and stagnant blood; if bluish-purple, this is coldness and stagnant blood.
Blue	Cold causing stagnant or deficient blood
Bluish-red	Heat and blood stagnation; heat in the blood; heat in an organ; kidney yin deficiency with liver blood stagnation

TONGUE BODY SHAPE	
The body shape indicates the state of blood, qi, yin, yang, fluids; any long-term pathology.	
BODY SHAPE	INDICATIONS
Thin	And pale indicates deficient blood. And red with no coat or a peeled coat designates deficient yin (lack of body fluids).
Swollen	And pale indicates phlegm/dampness from deficient yang (coldness). And red or normal colored designates phlegm/dampness and heat. Swollen edges or teeth marks indicates deficient spleen qi
Stiff	Internal wind. And red designates heat injuring body fluids.
Flaccid	And red indicates deficient body fluids (dryness, or deficient yin - lack of body fluids); And pale designates deficient qi and blood
Long	Heat, particularly heat in the heart
Short	And pale and wet indicates internal coldness. And red with no coat or a peeled coat designates extreme deficient yin, or heat stirring liver wind.
Narrow	Liver qi stagnation; liver blood stagnation; or both
Depressed areas	Energetic depletion in the associated organs
Cracked	Excess heat or deficient yin.

(horizontal, vertical, branches)	A deep and long midline crack reaching to the tip indicates a tendency toward physical heart pattern imbalances. Deep cracks on the sides indicate long-term spleen qi deficiency.
Trembling	Deficient spleen qi.
Crooked/Deviated	Internal wind, generally liver wind, or external wind invading
Curled up edges/sides	Stagnant liver qi
Contracted	Deficiency of the associated organ; liver qi stagnation
Contracted & red	Ascending liver fire
Strawberry/red Spots or Points	Heat toxins, stagnant blood, or heat in the blood; fire in the associated organs
Swollen Sides	Liver yang rising, or liver fire
Hammer-shaped	Kidney yin and essence deficiency with spleen qi deficiency
Uneven Sides (one side swollen, the other normal)	Deficient qi & blood on one side of the body; stagnation of qi and blood on one side of the body; or lack of nourishment to the channels due to qi and blood deficiency
Notch at tip	Heart blood deficiency
Pointed tip and red	Heart fire
Curled under tip	Heart blood deficiency
Curled up Tip	Heart heat

TONGUE COATING	
Tongue coating indicates the state of the yang organs; very important in acute conditions as it indicates depth and quality of the external pathogens.	
TONGUE COATING	INDICATIONS
Thick coat	Presence of an internal or external pathogenic factor – if external, it's penetrating to deeper into the interior; Excess conditions
Thin coat	Normal if white; Deficiency conditions
No coat/peeled coat	Deficient yin (lack of body fluids). In center of tongue indicates deficient stomach yin (lack of fluids in the stomach) In rear of tongue and tongue is red all over designates deficient kidney yin (lack of fluids in the kidneys)
Peeled with thorns in peeled area	Fire in the yin deficiency
Wet, sticky coat	And white or pale: dampness from cold (deficient spleen qi and yang, or kidney yang) And yellow: damp heat And greasy/sticky and white: more serious yang deficiency = accumulation of damp cold (transforming to phlegm)
White coat	Cold (if coat is thin and white, this is normal)
Yellow coat	Excess heat
Grey/Black coat	And wet indicates extreme coldness; And dry designates extreme excess heat; both are more serious

Tofu-like coat (big, rough-grained, flakes on surface)	Excessive internal heat or food stagnation
White/yellow/white	Cold dampness blocking the qi and transforming to heat
Yellow/black/yellow	Extreme heat in the stomach (heat has consumed fluids)

TONGUE MOISTURE	
This indicates the state of body fluids.	
TONGUE MOISTURE	INDICATIONS
Wet	Dampness
Slightly dry	Deficient blood
Dry	And a coat indicates excess heat, And no coat or a peeled coat indicates deficient yin (lack of body fluids)
Creamy or Greasy	Retention of dampness or phlegm.

TONGUE MOVEMENT	
Indicates depletion of qi or presence of wind.	
Trembling	Deficient spleen qi
Constant movement from side to side	Internal wind with possible impending stroke
Deviated	And Pale: internal wind from deficient blood And Red: internal wind from heat
Stiff with greasy coat	Internal wind
Can't fully extend; or extends and pulls back repeatedly	Internal wind with possible impending stroke

TONGUE IN ACUTE CONDITIONS	
Exterior/Interior	Tip represents Exterior; lower two thirds represents Interior
Half External/Half Internal	One side has a white coat that's wet and slippery
Pale	External cold blocks qi and yang in the interior
Red	External heat going to the interior
Deep Red	External heat going to the interior

SUBLINGUAL VEINS	
Dark blue	Very severe blood stagnation
Very swollen	Very severe blood stagnation
One-sided	Injury on one side of the body
Bright red capillaries	Development of toxic heat