

Persian Traditional Medicine: An Introduction

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ABSTRACT

Persian traditional medicine may be regarded as the sum total of all the knowledge and practices of medicine used in Persia from ancient times till today. The medicine gives more attention and importance to the prevention of disease rather than its cure. Many patients in developing and developed countries have turned to traditional therapies for treating their illnesses. This is due to tradition and cost; modern medicines are prohibitively expensive in those nations. This paper provides an introduction to Persian traditional medicine in Iran.

KEYWORDS: *traditional medicine, Persian traditional medicine, Islamic traditional medicine, Iranian traditional medicine*

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INTRODUCTION

Since time immemorial, human beings have tried to create means of survival and protection against all poisons and illnesses. They were motivated by the universal desire for longevity. Since the beginning of civilization, herbal, animal and mineral medicaments have been used to treat diseases. According to the World Health Organization, traditional herbal medicines are naturally occurring, with minimal or no industrial processing that have been used to treat illness. Traditional herbal medicines are getting significant attention in global health debates. Persian traditional medicine (also known as Iranian traditional medicine), with more than 4000 years of history, consists of the sum total of all the knowledge and practices used in diagnosis, prevention, and treatment in Iran from ancient times to the present. It was combined by different medical traditions from Egypt, Greece, India, and China.

Iran is located in southwest Asia. It is a country of mountains and deserts. It is regarded as the jewel in Islam's crown. The nation consists of numerous ethnic groups. Although many languages originated

from Iran, Persian is the most used language. Persian is considered the language of intellectuals during much of the 2nd millennium,

Iranian traditional medicine (also known as Persian medicine or Tebb e Sonnati) is one of famous forms of traditional medicine. It is also one of the most ancient forms of medicine in the world. The practice of medicine in Persia has a long and prolific history. Persian traditional medicines (PTM) have been used for centuries and their effects have been proven over the years. Studies show that earliest records of the history of ancient Iranian medicine can be found in 8,000 to 6,500 B.C. The medicine reached its peak with the rise of Islam in Iran. Iranians believe that food is medicine and every disease starts in the gut.

CONCEPT OF PERSIAN TRADITIONAL MEDICINE

Iranian traditional medicine strongly focuses on prioritizing health maintenance and disease prevention over treatment. It is based on four basic substances, called humors, that divide human fluid

into four basic types: Blood (Dam), Phlegm (Balgham), Yellow bile (Şafra'), and Black bile (Sauda'). They are illustrated in Figure 1 and explained as follows [1]:

- *Blood*: This is the most abundant and the most important humor in the body which will be formed by eating food. Children in particular need larger amounts of "blood" for growth and they get it by consuming foodstuff.
- *Phlegm*: Next to blood, phlegm is the second most abundant humor in the body. It is a slimy liquid very much like water (colorless, odorless, and tasteless) and it can be found in body parts. Phlegm can be considered as a kind of food supply for the body.
- *Yellow bile*: This acts as a diluent and facilitates the transfer of blood and nutrients from capillaries to the remote body organs. It is also in charge of metabolism of fats and digestion. Yellow bile is tasked with cleaning up the digestive system, vascular tissues, and genitalia.
- *Black bile*: This strengthens body parts. It is sparse but essential to the body. The right amounts of black bile keep bones healthy and strong. Bones, teeth, and tendons primarily live off black bile. Lack of black bile in the body will compromise bone's strength and the tendons function.

When the four humors are in balance, they bring physical and mental health. Any excess or deficiency of any of the four bodily fluids in a person may lead to diseases and disabilities. The basic knowledge of four senses of humor as a healing system was developed by Hakim Ibn Sina in his medical encyclopedia *The Canon of Medicine*. The old medical system is a tradition with roots further in the ancient Iranian and Indian past.

Persian traditional medicine determines hotness (*Garmi*) and coldness (*Sardi*) of foods by the impact that they have on the human body. Hot foods are usually eaten during cold weathers to keep the body warm. Cold foods are consumed during the warm seasons. They are harder to digest and harder to assimilate. Determining which foods are appropriate for your temperament is crucial to maintaining sound health and wellbeing.

Persian traditional medicine (PTM) is a holistic medicine that prioritizes health maintenance over treating diseases. It provides great attention to the spiritual aspects of life as well as somatic aspects to maintain human health. Nutrition plays a crucial role in maintaining body health. The quality and quantity

of foods would influence mental health. Therefore, the traditional physician should correct the nutritional habit of the patients as the first step toward healing.

The lifestyle rules in PTM focus on six fundamental and guiding principles, known as *Setah Zaroriah* in Persian [2]:

- Nutrition
- Environment
- Physical activity
- Sleeping patterns
- Emotions
- Ridding the body of waste materials

These principles are illustrated in Figure 2 [3]. One must take these basic principles into account in maintaining sound health. Learning about the daily lifestyle of the patients, their family and social interactions and health, their sleep patterns, and daily habits can provide important information that helps uncover their health condition.

Medicinal plants have attracted the attention of Iranians from ancient times. Over the years different kinds of extraction and preparing herbal medicines were developed and used. Some of these herbal medicines are used all over the world. Different kinds of diseases are cured by means of herbal therapy. Figure 3 displays various types of Persian traditional medicines [4]. Persian traditional practitioners can use these traditional medicines to cure diseases. Figure 4 shows Mostafa Rahemi, a Persian traditional medicine man who heals using herbs and plants [5].

IRANIAN HERBS

Herbal medicine, also known as herbalism, is based on the use of plants for healing and the maintenance of health. It is often used after medical examinations and diagnosis have been done. They are based on their effectiveness, efficacy, and properties, to eliminate the symptoms of the disease. There are 8100 plant species and about 2300 aromatic spices in Iran now. Herbal remedies are consumed in many forms, including teas, tisanes (or infusions), decoctions, macerations, tinctures, and elixirs. Some of these herbal medicines are produced commercially these days. For example, Figure 5 shows medicinal herbs effective for gray hair [6].

The most common herbal medicines among Iranians are [7]:

- *Borage* (*golgavezaban*): It grows in the northern parts of Iran and its purple flower is using in the same way that tea leaves are using.
- *Shahla* is continuing an Iranian tradition of medicine going back several thousand years.

- *Valerian* (Sonboletip): Valerian is one of those Persian herbal medicine mostly using to calm down the nerves. It is useful for those who suffer from insomnia.
- *Rocket seeds* (khakeshir): These tiny brown seeds have great health benefits. Khakshir is a natural liver detoxifier. It also improves skin and clears the blemishes.
- *Chicory* (kasni): This has some advantages such as cooling nature to reduce the body temperature and it is also good for liver diseases.
- *Thyme* (Avishan): This herbal tea is good for a dry cough and upper respiratory tract inflammation as it is a kind of disinfectant. It is also good for digestion and sleeping problems.

APPLICATIONS OF PERSIAN TRADITIONAL MEDICINE

Persian traditional medicine has been applied successfully to treat various diseases such as coughing, constipation, premature ovarian failure, neurological diseases, sleeplessness, liver diseases, psychiatry diseases, infertility, impotence, and erectile dysfunction. The main goal is to correctly diagnose the disease and to treat the patients in the shortest time.

- *Constipation*: There is no effective modern drug for constipation. However, there are many medicinal material in Persian traditional medicine that can be used for treatment of constipation. Constipation is one of the most harmful factors in cardiac health. Four important medicines with laxative effect are *Prunus domestica*, *ficus cariaca*, *Cassia fistula*, and *Cucurbita maxima* [8].
- *Depression*: This is one of the most common mental disorders around the world. Depression and loneliness are important factors that endanger the health of people, especially the elderly. Traditional Persian medicine has provided remedies for depression management. Taken together, apigenin, caffeic acid, catechin, chlorogenic acid, citral, ellagic acid, esculetin, ferulic acid, gallic acid, gentiopicroside, hyperoside, kaempferol, limonene, linalool, lycopene, naringin, protocatechuic acid, quercetin, resveratrol, rosmarinic acid, and umbelliferone are suitable for the management of depression [9].
- *Sleeplessness*: Sleep is physical, passive, and mental rest. Sleeplessness or insomnia is a sleep disorder which affects almost half of the general population. Iranian traditional herbal remedies can be used to address the problem of

sleeplessness. Drinking dragonhead herbal tea can help with difficulty in sleeping. This tea is from mint family. Five grams of the tea in hot water in a mug, taken an hour before sleep, will produce calming effects [10].

- *Liver Cleansing*: Liver is an important organs of the body and should be well protected. Proper cleansing and detoxification of the liver is carried out with Persian traditional medicine. The extract of the plant artichoke reduces fat reserves in the liver and eliminate toxins accumulated in the liver. It should be used in the form of tea for 45 days (during the day after meals) in order to regulate liver enzymes [11].
- *Coronavirus*: This is a life-threatening viral infection. The World Health Organization (WHO) and medical experts from all over the world consider the only way to fight and prevent the Coronavirus is regular hand washing and home quarantine. When the modern medical system cannot treat COVID-19, the traditional medical community has explored its remedy by herbal medicines. The School of Persian Medicine worked along the World Health Organization to fight against COVID-19. The disease is spreading fast, and needs to be prevented from spreading. Professor Khairandish known as the “Father of Iranian Traditional Medicine” highlights the reasons for the current epidemic, the treatment, and the protection against this virus. His success in treating the corona patients saved countless lives [12].
- *Cardiovascular Diseases*: These are major health complications. The management of heart diseases as a prevention step or as treatment with low-cost procedures like lifestyle modifications are important current trends. One of the most important strategies for reducing these consequences is to correct unhealthy family diets. Choosing right, effective foods based on individual temperament is recommended by Persian physicians. Besides the foods effective in retaining health for cardiac patients, saffron has a special role [3]. The concept of nutrition in heart diseases has had a successful background at least from 1000 years ago in Persia.
- *Erectile Dysfunction*: Due to health, cultural, and individual differences, the global prevalence of ED differs from one nation to another. The high costs of its conventional treatment has motivated researchers to look for alternative approaches to the treatment of sexual dysfunction. The use of medicinal plants for male reproductive function is associated with their antioxidant activity, since

they present in their compositions phytochemical compounds able to inhibit spermatid membrane lipid peroxidation. Various medicinal herbs have been used for impotency and erectile dysfunction [13].

- *Epilepsy*: Epilepsy is an important issue in the field of neuroscience. In Persian traditional medicine, herbal remedies have been used for centuries to treat seizures. Iranian scientists such as Avicenna (Ibn Sina) and Rhazes (Zakariya al-Razi) prescribed different approaches to prevent and treat epilepsy. Twenty-five plants have been identified as herbal remedies to treat epilepsy [14].

BENEFITS

There is an increasing trend to use traditional medicine. A significant amount of people in developing nations presently use herbal medicine for primary healthcare. Persian traditional medicine is based on preventive healthcare and living a proper lifestyle instead of treatment. Traditional medicine has grown significantly in recent years in Iran. Every clinical service using the traditional remedies must be certified by the Ministry of Health. The School of Persian Medicine, shown in Figure 6, is the first and most distinguished Persian traditional medicine in the Middle East [15]. It promotes traditional medicine and encourages developing new medicine thorough research.

CHALLENGES

Persian traditional medicine has been overshadowed by the Western medicine over the past two centuries. Some medicinal trees mentioned in classical texts of Persian traditional herbal medicine do no longer grow in Iran today. Many modern doctors are skeptical about the impact of herbal therapy in the management of various diseases.

CONCLUSION

Persian traditional medicine is a set of knowledge and skills in the diagnosis, prevention, and treatment of diseases from ancient times till now. The development and promotion of traditional medicine around the world constitute honor and respect to the culture and heritage of the people everywhere. There is a growing tendency towards traditional medicine in the world as well as growing interest in Persian Medicine in Iran. Considering the importance and richness of traditional Iranian medicine, Persian traditional medicine needs revival. More information about Persian traditional medicine can be found in the books in [16-20] and related journals:

- Archives of Iranian Medicine
- Journal of Integrative Medicine
- Journal of Medicinal Plants Research

- Current Traditional Medicine
- Traditional Medicine Research
- Journal of Traditional and Complementary Medicine
- Traditional and Integrative Medicine

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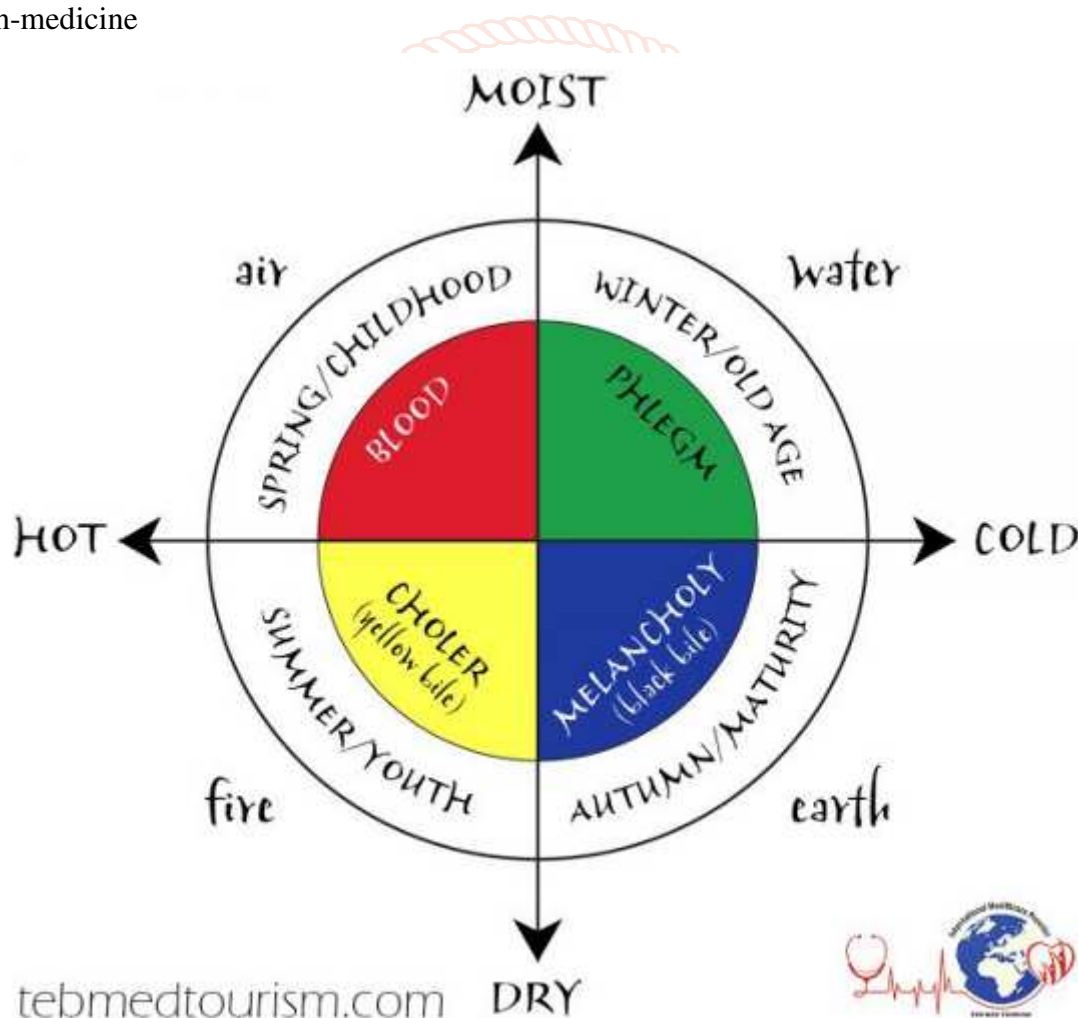


Figure 1 Four basic types [1].

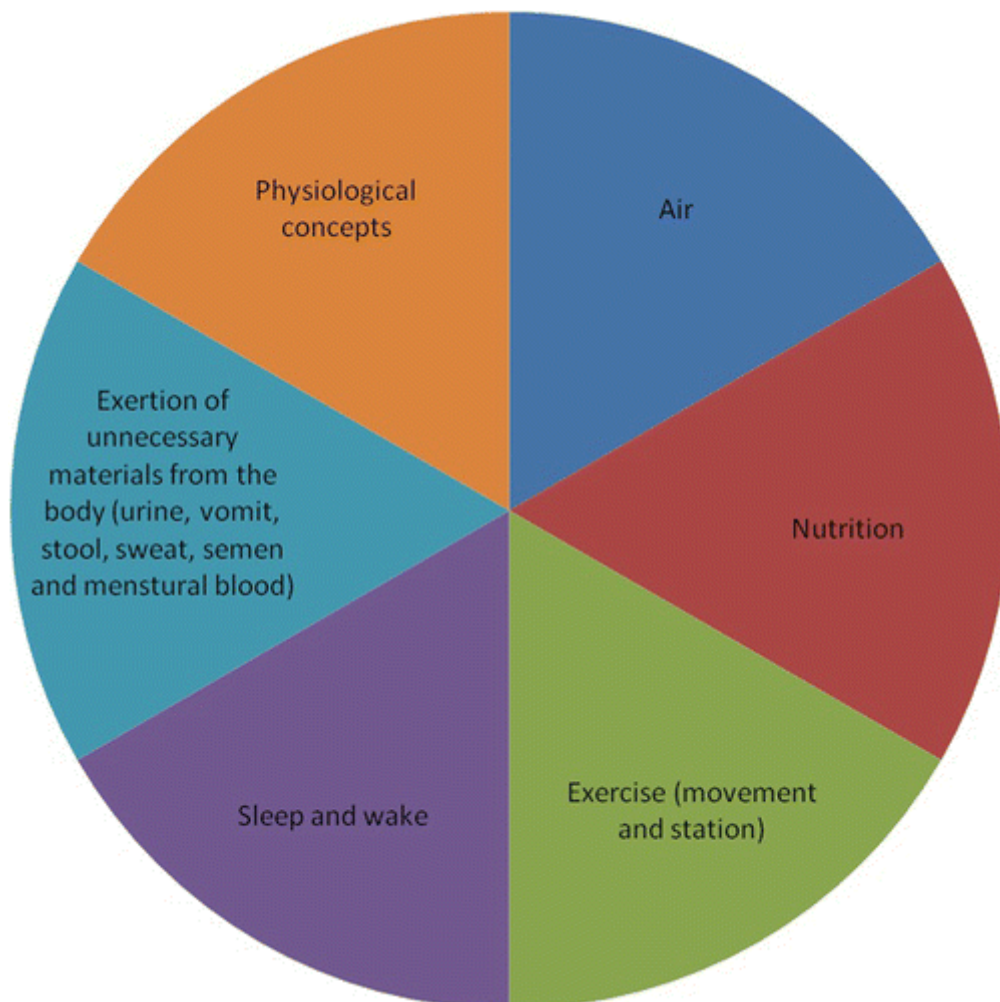


Figure 2 Six principles to keeping health in traditional Persian medicine [3].



Figure 3 Various types of Persian traditional medicines in display [4].



Figure 4 Mostafa Rahemi, the Persian traditional medicine man [5].

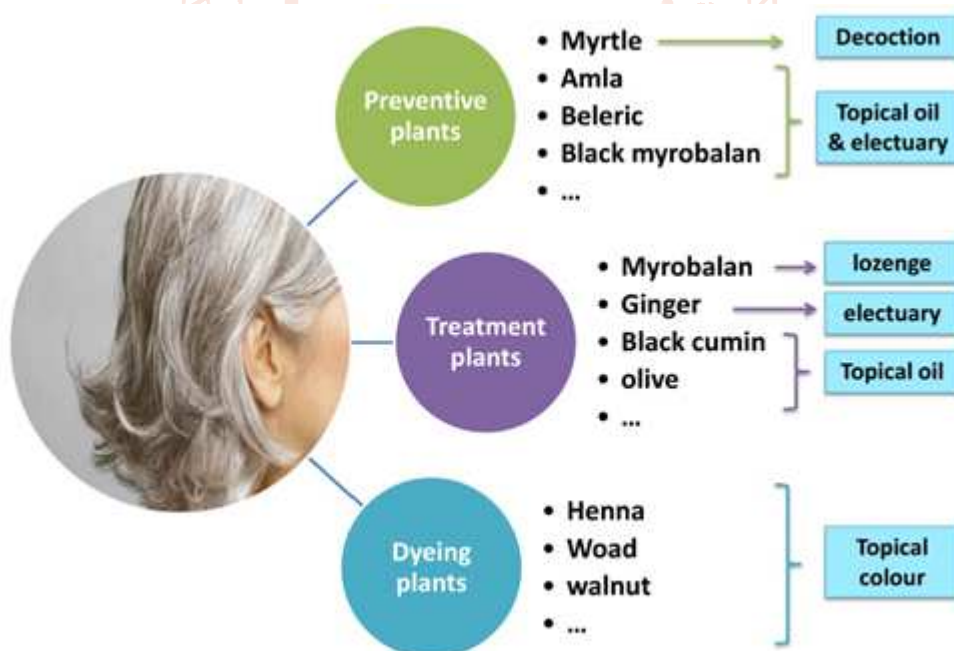


Figure 5 Medicinal herbs effective for gray hair [6].



Figure 6 School of Persian Medicine [15]

