

PORIA FIVE FORMULA *WU LING SAN*

ORIGINS: *Shang Han Lun* by Zhang Zhong Jing,
Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220 A.D.)

Poria Five Formula (*Wu Ling San*), also known as “Hoelen Five Formula”, is a classic *Shang Han Lun* formula for treating water metabolism issues with urinary difficulty or fluid retention. Over the centuries this formula has been applied to a wide range of disorders involving water metabolism. A full discussion is provided below

GENERAL SIGNS/SYMPTOMS

Water metabolism dysfunction with urinary difficulty or edema. Any type of edema anywhere in the body; urinary inhibition, abdominal distention, loose stools, physical and mental fatigue with heavy sensation in head, chest congestion, cold sensation in lumbar, dizziness, borborygmus, thirst with vomiting of bubbles, mild fever with thirst and fullness.

CLASSICAL APPLICATIONS

1. Tai yang stage fu syndrome, where an external cold pathogen has penetrated into the tai yang fu organ.

- Inhibited urination
- Dysuria
- Floating, slightly rapid pulse
- Mild fever
- Irritability
- Thirst with vomiting immediately after drinking

2. Spleen deficiency resulting in water accumulation in the muscles and skin.

- Edema
- Inhibited urination
- Susceptibility to frequent colds

3. Retention of congested fluids in the lower burner.

- Urine retention
- Vomiting of frothy saliva
- Vertigo
- Cough
- Sensation of throbbing below the umbilicus

INGREDIENTS

| PINYIN | LATIN | ENGLISH | PERCENT OF FORMULA |
|-----------------------------|--|---|--------------------|
| Ze Xie (Chief) | <i>Alisma Plantago-aquatica</i> (rhizoma) | <i>Alisma</i> – Asian Water Plantain Rhizoma | 32.4% |
| Fu Ling (Deputy) | <i>Wolfiporiae Cocos</i> (sclerotium) | <i>Poria</i> , <i>Sclerotium of Tuckahoe</i> , China Root, Hoelen | 18.5% |
| Zhu Ling (Deputy) | <i>Grifolia Umbellata</i> | <i>Polyporus</i> , Umbellate pore fungus | 18.5% |
| Bai Zhu (Assistant) | <i>Atractylodes Macrocephala</i> (rhizoma) | White <i>Atractylodes</i> Rhizome | 18.5% |
| Gui Zhi (Assistant & Envoy) | <i>Cinnamomum Aromaticum</i> (ramulus) | Cinnamon Twig, Cassia Twig | 12.1% |

GENERAL INDICATIONS / MODERN APPLICATIONS

As evidenced by the list of general indications below, **Poria Five Formula** is useful in a variety of patterns involving fluid disorder, such as can be found in various genitourinary, cardiac, pulmonary and nephritic conditions. With appropriate presentation (water metabolism dysfunction), this formula may benefit the following:

- Ascites
- Cardiac edema from congestive heart failure
- Cough from fluid retention
- Diarrhea
- Dizziness
- Edema, a variety of causes
- Fever
- Genitourinary infections
- Headache
- Heaviness, generalized
- Hepatitis, infectious
- Hypertension
- Meniere’s disease
- Motion sickness
- Nephritis, acute and chronic
- Preeclampsia
- Prostatitis, early stages
- Renal failure, chronic
- Scrotal hydrocele
- Shortness of breath
- Umbilicus, throbbing sensations
- Urinary difficulty
- Urinary retention
- Vertigo
- Vomiting
- Water weight gain, premenstrual and other

FORMULA ACTIONS

- Promotes urination
- Warms the yang
- Drains dampness
- Promotes the transforming and transporting functions of qi
- Strengthens the spleen

TONGUE

Swollen, wet, may have white and greasy coating

PULSE

Slippery (water accumulation due to spleen deficiency)

Superficial or floating and slightly rapid (external pathogen obstructing the *tai yang*)

Possibly deep and/or wiry (metabolism issue or liver overacting on spleen).

CONTRAINDICATIONS / CAUTIONS

CLASSICAL

Avoid long term use in cases of severe spleen and/or kidney deficiency.

MODERN

Avoid combining with other diuretic herbs or drugs as there may be additive or synergistic effects.

Refer to the individual herb listings for more detailed information on general contraindications, cautions, herb-drug interactions and more.

DOSAGE

For chronic conditions or as a maintenance dose:

Take as directed on bottle. Formula is safe for long term use except as contraindicated above..

For severe or acute conditions:

You can safely double the dose for up to 14 days. If acute/severe condition does not abate with larger dose, re-evaluate the diagnosis or refer to an MD.

SYNERGY OF INGREDIENTS

The herbs in this formula not only facilitate urination, but also increase general circulation of blood and body fluids throughout the body. They do so by gently lifting the middle qi, strengthening the spleen, and warming and activating the yang qi to promote circulation and transformation of fluids. Thus, while some of the herbs have a descending quality to promote urination, others have a lifting or circulating quality. This upward/downward technique is an ancient one, used to correct a poorly functioning qi *ji*, or qi mechanism. A great many patterns can benefit from this corrective action.

The chief herb (*ze xie*) and deputy ingredients (*fu ling* and *zhu ling*) act synergistically to drain dampness, unblock and regulate the urinary pathways, and drain heat from the urinary bladder. The cold nature of *ze xie* enables it to eliminate pathogenic heat from the urinary bladder directly.

The spleen likes dryness. Dampness has a tendency to wrap the spleen and impair its function. *Bai zhu* and *fu ling* are used to dry the spleen and drain dampness respectively. Together they help to eliminate turbidity and excess fluids by supplementing the spleen and promoting urination.

Gui zhi is an important herb for three categories of circulation. This ingredient expands the application of the formula beyond simply one that assists in emptying the bladder and reviving the spleen. *Gui zhi* warms the channels, promotes blood circulation, and unblocks the yang qi in the chest. It therefore opens three distinct categories of circulation: ying qi, yang qi, and blood. In addition, *gui zhi* enters both channel and *fu* of the *tai yang*. When combined with the other herbs in this formula, *gui zhi* unblocks the upper body and channels and guides out the blockage through the urine, which is disinhibited by the synergy of the other herbs. *Ze xie*, *fu ling*, and *zhu ling* unblock the lower burner; *fu ling* and *bai zhu* unblock the middle burner; while *gui zhi* unblocks the upper burner, unifies the formula, and guides the whole to the bladder. It is by the addition of *gui zhi* that Poria Five Formula can be prescribed for such diverse conditions as congestive heart failure, facial edema, fatty liver, and scrotal hydrocele.

When there is chronic impairment of the spleen and lungs by dampness or water, the transformative action of the kidney yang can also become strained. *Gui zhi* helps to preserve the kidney yang by unblocking the yang qi and dispersing cold. The formula as a whole, since it revives the water transformation function of the spleen and lung, protects the kidney function by spreading more evenly and naturally the work of water metabolism among the three organs.

ANALYSIS OF CLASSICAL INDICATIONS

There are three main classical patterns indicating use of this formula:

Pathogenic influences from a tai yang channel stage disorder penetrate to the urinary bladder, becoming a tai yang fu syndrome.

In the *Shang Han Lun*, this is referred to as “tai yang water retention syndrome” (*tai yang xu shui zheng*). This occurs as the result of the externally contracted pathogenic influence transferring along the course of the *tai yang* to the urinary bladder. The key characteristic of such a pattern is a recent onset of a *tai yang* stage disorder now with dysuria (any difficulty during urination, usually accompanied by discomfort). Other symptoms include a floating and relatively rapid pulse, mild fever, headache, irritability, and thirst with vomiting immediately after drinking. Vomiting of fluids in this pattern is known as *shui ni zheng*, or “water rebellion disorder.” Since the pathogen has blocked the downward elimination of water, there is no place for newly consumed water to go. The qi that directs the fluids downward therefore becomes rebellious and cycles back upwards, resulting in vomiting of fluids.

Spleen deficiency pattern resulting in accumulation of water in the muscles and skin.

In the *tai yang* stage fu syndrome discussed above, the problem is of an excess nature and lies within the bladder, in the lower burner. In this pattern the problem is a weakness in the middle burner: “earth failing to transport water,” and is a deficiency that has allowed an excess to manifest. As a result of this deficiency, excess water accumulates in the muscles and skin in the form of edema or water weight gain. The spleen, being the *zang* of the middle burner, is a pivot lying between the upper and the lower burners. When the center is weak, the upper and lower tend to suffer as well. This is how spleen qi deficiency and the consequent dampness can affect the entire water metabolism mechanism of the triple burner. Urinary difficulty and diarrhea are often accompanying symptoms. Patients with this pattern may also present with a history of frequent external invasion, since the spleen qi plays such an important role in supporting the defensive (*wei*) qi.

Retention of congested fluids in the lower burner.

The third pattern is located in the lower burner, but unlike the *tai yang fu* syndrome, it is not an

external pathogen penetrating from the *tai yang* channel that causes this pattern. Rather, fluids begin to congest in the lower burner, which lead to an obstruction of the yang qi. When the obstructed yang qi builds up, there is a throbbing pulsation below the umbilicus and an upward rebellion of frothy fluids. If the ascent of the clear yang into the upper burner is obstructed, there may be vertigo and cough.

MODERN APPLICATIONS

Poria Five Formula is often underestimated by practitioners. It can be used alone or as the foundation for a variety of treatments and, therefore, should be considered an important tool in one’s herbal repertoire. Below is a brief discussion of just some of the applications for **Poria Five Formula**:

Edema and Water Retention

Edema is a common manifestation of water metabolism dysfunction. It usually represents excessive extracellular water and sodium due to abnormal renal excretion, but edema may also be caused by heart or liver disease. Serious conditions should be ruled out before deciding upon treatment.

Edema of the upper body is often termed “wind edema” or “yang edema,” as its onset is characteristically abrupt and localized in the area of the face. Yin edema, on the other hand, usually begins in the ankles or feet and has an insidious onset. It can easily turn to pitting edema. Yin edema is often due to kidney /spleen qi deficiency or blockage in the middle or lower burners impairing the ability to transform fluids, allowing them to descend. **Poria Five Formula** is best suited for yin edema, yet treats edema and water disorders throughout the body.

Water retention and bloating during a woman’s menstrual cycle is a common manifestation of impaired water metabolism function. This type of water retention is due to an underlying kidney and spleen deficiency. The deficiency of these two organs is aggravated during certain phases of the cycle. If the spleen is weak, when the liver qi becomes excess during loss of liver blood via the uterus, bloating and fluid retention may be the consequence. When the kidney has to allocate some of its energy to ovulation and endometrial changes, it may not have sufficient qi to efficiently regulate water metabolism. The stagnation from the disharmony between the liver and spleen can impair the water metabolism

function of both the kidney and the spleen, resulting in retention of fluids in the abdomen. **Poria Five Formula** is effective for controlling menstrual water retention during its acute phase, but does not sufficiently address the underlying deficiencies or the liver qi stagnation. **Tang Kuei and Peony Formula** addresses these other issues when used alternately or in conjunction with **Poria Five Formula**. If this strategy does not resolve the issue within 6-9 menstrual cycles, or if after 3-4 cycles there appears a need to increase the dosage to achieve the same results, this is a clear sign that the underlying spleen / kidney deficiency needs to be addressed. The following prescriptions should be taken in conjunction with **Poria Five Formula** to address both branch and root of the issue: For both spleen and kidney yang deficiency, use **Sea of Qi Formula**; for kidney yang deficiency with little or no signs of spleen deficiency, use **Essential Yang Formula**; for spleen qi deficiency, use **Ginseng Endurance Formula** or **Ginseng & Astragalus Formula**.

One unconventional strategy that has much promise for treating underlying spleen qi and spleen/kidney yang deficiency in women's issues with chronic urinary or water metabolism symptoms is **Prostate Formula**. Most all of the ingredients of this formula are commonly employed in gynecological formulas, with the exception of saw palmetto and *bei xie* (*Dioscorea hypoglauca*). But saw palmetto is shown to lower total DHT in the system¹ and may have a mild anti-estrogen effect as well². These two qualities can benefit women by adjusting hormonal levels. *Bei xie*, besides resolving turbidity to treat urinary disorders, also has the action of expelling wind and dampness from the sinews and skin, thus enhancing the formula's overall ability to treat water retention due to spleen qi and general yang deficiency. The use of **Prostate Formula** to treat a gynecological issue is a good example of thinking outside the box by employing a formula because of the pattern it addresses rather than the manifestation of symptoms. **Prostate Formula**, like those mentioned in the previous paragraph, can be taken in conjunction with **Poria Five Formula** to treat menstrual edema. Adjust ratios according to predominance of deficiency and excess signs and symptoms.

Lung Edema, Congestive Heart Failure, Ascites
There is a saying in Oriental medicine: "dampness is the permeation of water, while water is the

accumulation of dampness." Though sometimes used interchangeably, a distinction between water and dampness can be seen in usage. Inside the body, dampness is any turbid fluid; it can have either an external or internal origin. "Water", *shui*, usually refers to a localized accumulation of fluid, usually in grossly measurable amounts. Heart edema, lung edema, and ascites are all good examples of "water" accumulation. It is not the turbidity that makes these conditions pathogenic, but the fact of their accumulation and the consequent interference with organ function and qi action. If the pathogenic water is not an emergency condition, **Poria Five Formula** may be used to treat these conditions because of its ability to unblock the water pathways in all three burners.

Diarrhea, Abdominal Pain, Nausea, Vomiting

Because **Poria Five Formula** enhances the transformation and transportation of fluids, it can be utilized when the small intestine fails in its task of separating the clear from the turbid. According to OM theory, the main job of the small intestine is to separate the still-recoverable clear essence of food and fluids from the chyme received from the stomach, which will then be recycled back into the body and used.

The action of the small intestine is supported by the spleen. If this action is impaired, excess fluids can pass into the large intestine, resulting in loose stool; while at the same time, due to a reduced amount of fluids passing to the urinary bladder, there will also be reduced urination.

Loss of small intestine ability to absorb fluids can also result in turbid fluids welling upward, leading to abdominal distention and pain, nausea and vomiting, and scanty urination. **Poria Five Formula** can help alleviate these symptoms by assisting the spleen qi to transform and transport fluids, facilitate urination, and restore water metabolism.

Hepatitis A, Fatty Liver

Spleen deficiency and poor digestion can result from accumulated dampness and phlegm. Such accumulations also inhibit proper functioning of the *qi ji*, the qi mechanism, impairing transformation and transportation of food and fluids, and negatively impacting water metabolism. When the accumulations are cleared away and the spleen function is sufficiently supported, damp and phlegm

accumulations can be resolved.

Lipid accumulations are closely associated with phlegm in OM. The liver occupies a central position in lipid metabolism. Fat accumulates in the liver primarily because of alcoholism or obesity. If your patient suffers from fatty liver, addressing the underlying cause is essential for success.

Inability of the three main OM organs to regulate water metabolism (lung, spleen, and kidney) results in stagnation, or even obstruction. The inability can be due to either weakness of these organs or excesses in diet, wherein the kidney or spleen are over-taxed and unable to keep up with elimination. When this results in obstruction, the smooth flow of qi is blocked and causes counter flow along the internal pathways. Dampness can combine with heat from the stagnant qi to create damp-heat or even toxic-damp. Damp-heat has an affinity for the *shao yang* (gallbladder and triple burner); thus, the counter flow of this damp-heat often leads to the liver and gall bladder. The result is commonly hepatitis or fatty liver.

Poria Five Formula can be used to unblock the water pathways in these cases as well. When the pathway is unblocked, the flow resumes its natural course and the damp-heat is relieved through urination. It may be prudent to combine **Poria Five Formula** with another appropriate formula, such as **Bupleurum & Cinnamon Formula**, **Liver C Formula**, or **Shu Gan Formula**.

Meniere's disease

This disorder is characterized by four main symptoms: attacks of vertigo or dizziness, progressive and fluctuating sensory hearing loss, tinnitus, and a feeling of fullness or pressure in the ear. Meniere's disease is believed to be caused by a swelling of the fluid of the inner ear causing distension of the soft tissue that enfolds the bony labyrinth therein. Recent studies are beginning to relate this swelling to immune system dysfunction. In OM theory, this kind of vertigo is associated with a phlegm obstruction preventing the clear qi from rising to the head. The phlegm rises instead, giving rise to the listed symptoms.

The attacks are characteristically brief, but prostrating. Western drugs, such as Dramamine can help, but Dramamine takes about 40 minutes to work and the attack is usually over in a few minutes. Chinese herbal formulas that unblock

obstruction to the water metabolism to allow the clear yang to rise and those which supplement the qi of the spleen can be used as preventatives. **Poria Five Formula** is one formula that addresses both these actions and is commonly used for the prevention of attacks from Meniere's disease.

Nephritis, Renal Failure

Nephritis has a number of origins, both known and unknown. Acute nephritis may present with fever, possibly accompanied by an urticarial rash, and urinary dysfunction. If there is interstitial edema in the kidneys, the swelling will cause low back pain.

Symptoms and signs of renal failure relate to the loss of excretory function and depend on the degree of renal dysfunction, the rate of renal failure, and the cause. Acute renal failure can often be prevented by proper maintenance of normal fluid balance, blood volume, and blood pressure. This prevents excessive stress upon the kidneys and reduces the likelihood of further inflammation and scarring. The preventative approach involves clearing the water pathways to restore fluid balance and strengthening the middle so that qi, blood and body fluids may be restored through digestion.

Chronic renal failure is a long-standing, progressive deterioration of renal function. Symptoms develop slowly and include decreased appetite, nausea, vomiting, stomatitis, dysgeusia (distorted or decreased sense of taste), nocturia, lassitude, fatigue, muscle twitches and cramps, water retention, malnutrition, GI ulceration and bleeding, and peripheral neuropathies. Each of these signs and symptoms is related to a dysfunction of the spleen and kidney specifically, and the water pathways generally.

Poria Five Formula treats urinary disorders due to obstruction or dysfunction of the water pathways. This means it assists the kidneys, spleen and lungs to regulate water. *However, one should exercise caution not to use this formula long term or in too high a dosage, as it does drain fluids via the urine, and therefore may interfere with maintaining proper fluid volume and electrolyte balance.*

Prostatitis

As stated above, one of the three classical indications for this formula is accumulation of water in the urinary bladder, with qi unable to transform fluids resulting in urinary difficulty or fluid retention. In other words, this presentation begins with a *tai yang* channel invasion (e.g., a cold or flu), which is not

resolved and so follows the channel to its *fu* organ, the bladder itself. It then accumulates in the lower burner, interfering with water metabolism by inhibiting transformation and movement of fluids. This leads to dysuria, water rebellion and/or edema.

Prostatitis is often found to have been preceded by a *tai yang* channel invasion. The patient might describe having had in the recent past chills and fever, body aches, an aversion to cold, etc. There may have been a brief break in the symptoms as the pathogen made its way down to the lower burner. Once lodged in the lower burner, the pathogen begins again to engage the *wei qi*. This battle creates heat, which can transfer to the prostate. Oftentimes, when this happens there is a resurgence of the initial symptoms caused by the pathogen, but now with lower abdominal discomfort and burning during urination. In the absence of heat signs, **Poria Five Formula** is an excellent formula to treat prostatitis. However, with heat signs present, **Polyporus and Dianthus Formula** or **Gentiana Drain Fire Formula** may be a better choice, as they strongly clear heat and are more appropriate for purely excess conditions.

Scrotal Hydrocele

Hydrocele is a common mass resulting from accumulation of clear, sterile fluid in the scrotal tissue. Hydrocele is usually painless, unless it is very large. Because the fluid forming the mass is clear and scrotal tissue is thin, the mass will allow light to pass through it in a transillumination test. This test distinguishes the hydrocele from other masses.

Hydrocele is due to overproduction or diminished resorption of normal scrotal fluids. **Poria Five Formula** unblocks the pathways of absorption, assists the resorption of these fluids, and warms the yang to support transformation of fluids.

Preeclampsia

Preeclampsia is characterized by hypertension with albuminuria (more than the normal amount of protein in the urine) and edema in the third trimester of pregnancy. In severe cases, visual disturbances, headaches, and abdominal pain may be present. If preeclampsia is confirmed or suspected, it is important that the patient be closely monitored by Western medicine until a stable post-partum condition is maintained.

Poria Five Formula can act as a safe diuretic in preeclampsia and hypertension in general. It is safe to take during pregnancy and can even help regulate the proper amount of blood to the uterus.

FORMULA COMPARISONS

Poria Five Formula and Polyporus & Dianthus Formula

There may be inhibited urination in either case, but **Polyporus and Dianthus Formula** is best applied in cases of acute or sub-acute urinary tract infections, where the pathogen has entered the body through the urethra or is bacterial in nature. **Poria Five Formula** is more appropriate when the inhibited urination is chronic or when an exterior pathogen penetrated to the *tai yang fu* from the *tai yang* channel. **Polyporus & Dianthus Formula** is cooling and more sedating in nature; **Poria Five Formula** is more warming and supplementing.

Poria Five Formula and Sea of Qi Formula

Both formulas are appropriate to treat deficiency conditions manifesting as urinary issues. Both formulas warm the yang and supplement the spleen; **Sea of Qi Formula** additionally supplements the kidneys. **Poria Five Formula** opens the urinary passages when urine is blocked or when a water metabolism dysfunction inhibits the elimination of water. **Sea of Qi Formula** is applied when the deficiency leads to excessive urination or incontinence.

Endnotes

¹ Yang, Y, et al. *Int J Oncol*. 2007, Sep; 31(3) 593-600.

² Magdy M, et al. *Acta Obstet Gynecol Scand* 67: 397-399, 1988.