

INTRODUCTION TO TONGUE DIAGNOSIS

Tongue Diagnosis

Why do we look at the tongue?

- The tongue almost always reflects the true condition of the patient.
- Even if the signs and symptoms reported by the patient are confusing or contradictory, the tongue will give us an accurate picture of what is happening inside the body.

Examining the Tongue

- Use proper lighting. Sunlight is best. Artificial lighting may not give an accurate representation of the tongue color.
- Ask the patient to extend the tongue as much as possible in a relaxed manner.
- Examine the tongue for 15-20 seconds at a time. Prolonged extension of the tongue can cause the color to change.

Confounding Factors

Certain factors may alter the appearance of the tongue, giving us an inaccurate picture:

- **Colored foods** may stain the tongue.
- **Hot beverages** may temporarily make the tongue redder.
- **Coffee or tobacco** may turn the coating yellow.
- Some people may **scrape or brush their tongue**, removing the tongue coating

Examining the Tongue

When first examining the tongue, it may be helpful to break it down by asking a series of questions:

- What is the **color** of the tongue body?
- What is the **shape** of the tongue?
- Is the tongue **moist** or **dry**?
- Are there **cracks** on the tongue?
- Is there any **movement** of the tongue?
- What does the **coating** of the tongue look like? What is its color? Is it thick or thin? Is it evenly distributed?

Tongue Color

A normal tongue should be reddish-pink, like the color of fresh meat.

Pale	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• blood deficiency (dry)• yang deficiency (wet)• qi deficiency (bright and shiny)
Red	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• heat
Purple	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• blood stasis
Blue	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• internal cold

Tongue Shape

The shape of the tongue derives from the supply of body fluids (yin and blood) to the tongue.

Thin	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• blood deficiency (pale)• yin deficiency (red)
Swollen	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• SP or KI yang deficiency with dampness• Damp-heat in ST or SP• HT and ST heat (red)• SP qi deficiency (swollen edges, teethmarks)

Cracks on the Tongue

If the tongue begins to dry out, then cracks can form.

Horizontal Cracks	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• yin deficiency
Irregular Cracks	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• ST yin deficiency
Transverse Cracks on Sides	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• SP qi or SP yin deficiency
Vertical Crack in Middle	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• ST qi or ST yin deficiency
Vertical Crack Extending to Tip	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• HT yin deficiency• HT fire
Deep Central Crack with Smaller Cracks	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• KI yin deficiency with heat

Tongue Motility

If the tongue begins to dry out, then cracks can form.

Moving	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• internal wind
Quivering	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• SP qi deficiency (pale)• heat generating wind (red)
Deviated	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• wind (interior or exterior)

Tongue Coating

The tongue coating is a by-product of the Stomach's digestion of food and fluids.

A normal tongue coating is thin, white, slightly moist. It is normal for the coat to be thicker near the root.

White	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• normal or cold
Yellow	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• heat
Thick	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• dampness or phlegm
No coating	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• yin deficiency

Sublingual Veins

You can also look at the underside of the tongue to examine the veins on either side of the frenulum.

Distended (not dark)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• qi stagnation
Distended (dark)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• blood stasis
Yellowish Veins	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• dampness
White Veins	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• damp-cold