

## The Art of Chinese Pulse Diagnosis

When a doctor or nurse takes your pulse by placing two fingers on your wrist, they are assessing your heart's health by counting the number of beats per minute and noticing if you have a regular or irregular heart rate. But in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), pulse reading is far more complex and may uncover problems throughout the body.

How it works. A TCM practitioner takes many pulses on each patient, and the process can take anywhere from two to 15 minutes. The practitioner places three fingers on each wrist in turn, at two different levels of pressure (superficial and deep), for a total of 12 pulses (two under each finger). At the superficial level, the fingers rest lightly on the pulse, while a deeper reading is taken as fingers push down until the pulse briefly stops and then beats again. A skilled and experienced practitioner feels for pulse rate, depth, strength, texture, rhythm, and length. For example, a pulse might be slow, deep (felt only when heavy pressure is applied), and taut (with the texture of a taut rope).

Each of the 12 pulses is believed to correspond with a particular organ system such as the large intestine or liver, and the different pulse qualities help the practitioner determine if there are imbalances in the flow of life energy, or qi. If your pulse reading and other noninvasive diagnostic techniques reveal excesses or deficiencies of energy, the practitioner will develop an individualized treatment plan that may involve acupuncture, herbal formulas, dietary changes, tai chi, medical qigong (a form of energy medicine), and massage.

“Learning the art of pulse diagnosis takes years, says my friend and colleague Alex Holland, a licensed acupuncturist and author of *Voices of Qi* (North Atlantic Books, 2000) who teaches at the Program in Integrative Medicine. “But in the hands of a master, it’s a profound method of obtaining information about an individual’s health.” Another practitioner told me he thinks of the pulses as a 12-piece orchestra and tries to determine which instruments are playing out of tune.

My take. I believe pulse diagnosis is very reliable in the conceptual framework of TCM, which I’ve found can benefit allergic, autoimmune, digestive, infectious, musculoskeletal, and other conditions. To find a TCM practitioner, visit [nccaom.org](http://nccaom.org).