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CHINESE MEDICINE PREVENTS COLDS, FLU AND ALLERGIES

By Kath Bartlett MS, LAc

Many people suffer from frequent colds and flu's through out the winter season, or have seasonal allergies, that act up in the spring and fall. These are transitional seasons from the extreme heat of summer and extreme cold of winter. The body is naturally a little weakened at this time of year, as it adjusts its' metabolism from cooling to warming or visa versa. During transitional seasons, the body is constantly regulating itself to compensate for the changing weather that can vary day-to-day, or even hour-to-hour. This is the time when the body needs a little help to maintain homeostasis. It's the perfect time to get an acupuncture treatment to balance the body and boost the immune system.

In Chinese medical theory, the aspect of immune system protection that fend off outside invaders is called Wei Qi, or Defensive Qi. Qi (pronounced chee) translates broadly as life energy. Here, we speak of the energy that powers the immune system. Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) refers to outside invaders (germs, molds, pollens, viruses and bacteria) as 'disease evils', or pathogens¹. Defensive Qi circulates in the interstitial layers between the muscles and the skins. By governing the opening and closing of the pores, Defensive (Wei) Qi is responsible for keeping germs, pollens and molds from entering the body. People who suffer allergies, or who get frequent colds and flu's during the winter have weak Wei Qi, or immune function. This group includes the elderly; whose bodies' energy (Qi) is naturally weakened due to age, and people with generally weak Qi, who are chronically ill or frequently tired.

Wei Qi is governed by the Lung system, which rules the skin and things that come in through the surface of the body. External evils (germs, pollens, molds) affect the Lungs, causing cough, sore throat, running nose, nasal, sinus and phlegm congestion. In Chinese medical theory, different organ systems relate to various seasons: the Lung system is related to autumn. Those with weakened immune systems (Wei Qi) are especially venerable during the autumn season, because the ruling organ system of autumn (the Lungs) is weak. And so they begin getting sick. For allergy sufferers, the body's weak Wei Qi cannot deal with the rapid influx of pollen in the air, and their allergy symptoms start acting up.

Chinese medicine is very effective for building the energy of the immune system, as it is Qi (energy) that we work with. Qi flows through a system of vessels in the body, called meridians or channels (like blood vessels or the lymphatic system). Along the channels are points that the acupuncturist stimulates. These points are often described as wells that reach the river of Qi in the vessels. (When I'm palpating a patient to find an acupuncture point, I feel for a depression where I know the point should be.) The acupuncture points and (Chinese herbs) have certain empirical functions, like tonifying (building) Qi and Blood. When building Blood, we directly affect an important aspect of the immune system that fight infections and kill viruses and bacteria: white blood cells. Some points and herbs are good for stopping cough or drying up phlegm. Others open the pores to 'release the exterior', so the immune system's Defensive Qi can push out pathogens (germs) that are lurking near the surface of the body.

Acupuncturists start preventative treatments for patients with weak immune systems in the late summer, about mid-August. We want to begin building the Lung's Wei Qi (immune function) early, to strengthen it by the time the autumn season hits in late September and October. Patients do a short series of acupuncture treatments (four to seven visits) and take a Chinese herbal tonic to build up immune system. Depending how severely the immune system is compromised, treatment may continue throughout the winter season to keep the patient healthy and strong, and to help the body fight off any 'bugs' the patient gets exposed to.

You can think of this therapy as a Chinese flu shot, and its more effective than a vaccine. Pharmacists take their best guess each year at what they think the new flu virus will be, and then develop a vaccine against it. Often times they're wrong, explaining why the flu shot doesn't always work. With Chinese medicine, we take a different approach. We build immune function so the body is able to fight off whatever comes at it.

¹ Pathogen: 'Pathos', from the Greek, meaning disease, and 'gen' from 'generate. Pathogens are 'evil' processes that generate dis-ease in the body.