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LOOKING FOR ALLERGY RELIEF? GIVE ACUPUNCTURE A TRY

Sneezing, sniffing, watery eyes, nasal congestion and pain, itchy rashes and food intolerances: allergy symptoms can be very annoying and disruptive. Sufferers will try pills, nasal sprays and shots, often with little desirable effect. Have you been around the allergy block and now seek something different? Try the ancient Chinese method: Acupuncture.

Both eastern and western medicine agree: allergy symptoms, be it sneezing, running nose, nasal or sinus congestion and headaches, or even allergic skin reactions and digestive conditions, such as hives, atopic eczema and food intolerances are due to poor immune function. Western medicine tries to block hyper-immune response with sprays and pills, and overload the immune system circuits with allergy shots. Chinese medicine takes a different approach to treating allergies.

Traditional Chinese Medicine ¹ (TCM) uses a two-pronged 'root and branch' approach to treating allergic reactions. 'Root and branch' treatment means separating the allergic disease process into two different treatment strategies by addressing 'branch' symptoms and the 'root' cause or condition separately. First, the acupuncturist focuses on alleviating the branch symptoms of the disorder: sneezing, running nose, congestion, hives, and digestive problems. Then, after branch symptoms are contained, or between attacks for seasonal allergies, the treatment strategy changes to treating the 'root' problem: weak immune system and function.

TCM sees the weakened immune system as the crux of the problem. The immune system is not strong enough to fight allergens: dust, mold, pollen, pet dander, chemical or food. In order to fully resolve symptoms, tonification is necessary to build or strengthen immune function so that the system will no longer be overwhelmed by the allergic response to pathogens. However when symptoms are present (running nose, congestion and pain, rashes), treatment must be directed to addressing and containing the branch issues: drying up and opening the nasal passages, alleviating pain, improving digestion, returning skin to normal appearance and texture.

This two-pronged approach is very effective at eliminating symptoms for allergy sufferers, but it does take some time to achieve. During the height of allergy season, weekly treatments are usually needed to address branch symptoms. As the season comes to an end, and symptoms abate, root tonification begins and can continue for three to six months or more, depending on duration and severity of symptoms indicating the degree of weakness in immune function. When new attacks occur, treatment reverts to focusing on branch symptoms. Treatment continues until the root condition, the weakened immune system, is fully strengthened and functioning normally so that allergy symptoms no longer occur.

In my practice, I use a combination of acupuncture and Chinese herbal formulas (teas). I have patients come weekly for acupuncture treatments while symptoms persist. Between attacks, I space visits three to four weeks apart and rely on individualized herbal formulas to strengthen immune function. I have found this approach very effective in relieving allergy symptoms. In time, symptoms are fully treated and the allergic condition is resolved. Patients may come every three to six months for maintenance treatments, with little to no recurrence in symptoms. I have found allergic skin conditions such as hives and eczema respond more quickly to Chinese medicine. Lung (nasal and sinus) and digestive problems are deeper in the system. They take a little longer to treat, but do respond well to Chinese medical treatment.

¹Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) is an umbrella term describing the use of many different yet related medical modalities that work together in a unified holistic system for treating disease. Developed in ancient China 5,000-7,000 years ago and currently practiced in the hospital setting in modern China and throughout central Asia, TCM includes the use of acupuncture, Chinese herbal medicine, dietary therapy and meditative exercises called Tai Chi and Qi Gong.

TREATING ALLERGIES WITH CHINESE MEDICINE

Kath Bartlett, MS, LAc

Running nose, watery or itchy eyes, sneezing, headache and nasal congestion plague many people every spring and fall if they suffer seasonal allergies, or throughout the year for those allergic to pet dander, molds, dust chemicals and pollutants. Standard western medical treatment, including inhalers, pills and shots may reduce symptoms, but often cannot stop the condition from occurring. Acupuncture and Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) effectively treats allergies.

Western medicine generally gives all allergy sufferers a similar treatment. TCM differentiates allergies into different constitutional patterns, so that there are many different reasons and treatments for allergies, depending upon the individual. Because TCM treatment is more specific to each individual patient, it is generally more effective at treating allergies than standard western care.

How does TCM view the allergic process? In TCM theory, allergies include an element of dampness. Dampness is the TCM concept of pathological water accumulation. Edema, bloating and mucous are all examples of phlegm-damp accumulations. The mucous or phlegm production present in allergy sufferers shows a TCM pattern of phlegm-dampness in the body.

How does this dampness accumulate, according to TCM theory? Usually dampness occurs due to eating foods that are considered by TCM dietary therapy to be damp producing, or by poor digestion. When digestion is poor, fluids are not transformed and excreted properly and instead collect in the body causing problems such as edema, bloating and mucous production.

TCM signs of poor digestion include:

- Gas
- Bloating
- Nausea
- Poor appetite
- Loose stools
- Fatigue

TCM considers certain foods to be damp producing, and recommends allergy sufferers not eat the following:

- Bananas
- Oatmeal
- Orange Juice
- Dairy products (milk, yogurt, cheese)
- Wheat
- Coffee
- Alcohol

TCM further differentiates allergies by defining heat and cold conditions. TCM theory states that as humans are of the natural world, our bodies must operate according to the same laws as the natural world. Fire colors are red, yellow and orange. When these colors are seen in the body they indicate a heat condition. Hot allergy symptoms include red eyes and yellow mucous. Cold allergy symptoms include aversion to cold. This person wears sweaters, closes windows, and likes blankets. White or clear mucous excretions indicate cold (snow and ice are white and clear).

By differentiating allergy patterns, TCM can address more specifically the complaints as it relates to each individual, rather than giving everyone who suffers allergies the same treatment. Treating a cold allergy condition involves warming cold, with warm herbs such as cinnamon. Cooling heat by using herbs such as peppermint treats a hot allergy. The TCM herbalist prepares an herbal formula specific to the individual patient. Acupuncture points are used that have specific functions of cooling heat, draining dampness and improving digestion. Local points around the nose and head are used to open the sinuses and stop the headache pain.

TCM utilizes a two-fold approach to treating allergies. When symptoms are present, the acupuncturist focuses on remission of symptoms. Between attacks, treatment changes to treating the constitutional problem causing the symptoms: poor digestion and too much heat or cold in the body. Adjusting the treatment strategy between the constitutional problem and symptom resolution is a root and branch approach to treatment: addressing exacerbation of symptoms is a branch treatment; the constitution problem is a root cause of symptoms. Utilizing this root and branch approach, and by differentiating patterns, Chinese medicine effectively treats allergies. In many cases, a permanent resolution of symptoms is achieved. When that is not possible, a significant reduction of symptoms is accomplished.

ACUPUNCTURE, HERBS EASE HAY FEVER

By Alison McCook

Tue 19 October, 2004

NEW YORK (Reuters Health) - Regular sessions of acupuncture and daily doses of Chinese herbal medicine may help ease the burden of seasonal allergies, new research indicates.

A group of German investigators found that hay fever sufferers who received weekly acupuncture treatments and took three doses of a Chinese herbal formula per day showed fewer symptoms and were less likely to say their allergy was infringing on their daily activities than people who received a placebo treatment. "There are additional options to conventional medicine," lead author Dr. Benno Brinkhaus of the Charite University Medical Center in Berlin told Reuters Health. Brinkhaus suggested that people with seasonal allergies should consider acupuncture and herbs, but added that they should use it with caution, given that every treatment has side effects.

According to the report, published in the journal *Allergy*, the number of people with hay fever is growing in industrialized countries, affecting between 10 and 20 percent of the population. Many of these patients are now opting for alternative medicine, including Chinese remedies, but few studies have rigorously examined their effects, Brinkhaus and colleagues note.

To investigate, the researchers asked 52 adults with moderate hay fever to try a combination of acupuncture and Chinese herbs or a placebo treatment. People given the placebo regimen had needles applied to non-acupuncture sites, and were given a non-specific Chinese herbal formula. After 6 weeks, Brinkhaus and colleagues found that 85 percent of treated participants showed overall improvements in their hay fever, compared with only 40 percent of the comparison group.

More specifically, subjects who received the real treatment were more likely to report that their symptoms had decreased. They also tended to say their allergies were having less of an impact on their daily activities, such as sleep, everyday problems and general health. People who got the genuine treatment were also twice as likely to experience a remission of their allergy, and had a bigger decrease in the number of drugs they took to relieve hay fever symptoms during the study period. Patients given the real and sham treatment were equally likely to report side effects.

Brinkhaus noted that this study focused on people who already had symptoms, and acupuncture and herbs may be more effective when used before hay fever kicks in.

SOURCE: *Allergy*, September 2004.

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