

## All You Need to Know About Allergies and Acupuncture

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Allergy season is in the air- oh yes, the pun is intended. And people with seasonal allergies don't need to hear about the pollen count – their runny nose, sneezing and itchy eyes will let them know. These symptoms, collectively known as allergic rhinitis, may present themselves during the changes in season- spring or fall, but some patients also have year round symptoms due to an allergy to dust, mites or dander, to name a few.

**What are the common symptoms of allergies?** Some common complaints associated with allergic rhinitis are: runny nose; sneezing; itchy and watery eyes, nose, and throat; sinus congestion; skin rashes; hives; diarrhea and frequent urination. The biological basis of this is fairly well understood. The normal response of a healthy body when it encounters an allergen is an activation of the immune system which then destroys/gets rid of the allergen. However, this activation sometimes goes into overdrive, causing these symptoms of allergic rhinitis.

**How do we look at allergies in Oriental Medicine?** Allergies or hay fever are considered to be a manifestation of Wind invading the upper body as a result of a weakened defensive qi (also called Wei Qi). This weakened Qi usually results from an underlying deficiency that then makes the person more susceptible to dust, pollen etc. A Chinese medicine practitioner will work to help build up this defensive Qi as well as provide immediate relief of symptoms. This could be achieved using acupuncture, Chinese herbal remedies as well as addressing dietary issues.

**And how does acupuncture work? What is Qi?** Acupuncture is the oldest continuously practiced medical system in the world and is used by one third of the world's population as a primary health care system. The World Health Organization (WHO) has endorsed acupuncture treatment for many conditions, including stress, digestive disorders, depression, allergies, sleeping disorders, addictions, headaches, and menstrual disorders. This highly effective system of medical care is based on natural laws that govern the movement of vital life-giving energy. This energy, called Qi (pronounced Chee), moves through the body in precise channels and supports optimal functioning of the body, mind and spirit. A disruption of this energy flow causes an imbalance that begins to surface in the form of specific symptoms. These symptoms are viewed in relationship to the totality of a person in order to explore the root cause of a condition or illness. *Acupuncture is the insertion of very fine, sterile and single-use needles placed in specific acupuncture points to assist in rebalancing organ and bio-mechanical disharmonies.*

Qi flowing through the different organs and their associated meridians is called, for example, lung qi, or liver qi or kidney qi. The wei qi (or defensive qi, the equivalent of the immune system) is governed by the lungs. Thus, a weak lung qi is related to a weak defensive qi, resulting in problems with immunity in general, as well as specific lung-related issues such as breathing difficulties, cough etc. The nose is considered to be an extension of the lungs. Aerobic exercise helps strengthen lung qi, which in turn helps strengthen immunity.

Kidney qi deficiency may have multiple causes: aging, chronic illness, sudden fright or hereditary conditions. In hereditary conditions, allergic symptoms often begin during childhood. The kidneys are the source of all Qi within the body; thus, a deficiency of the Kidneys can also disrupt the functioning of the Lung's Defensive Qi. This condition frequently occurs in persons who also have a condition of asthma or eczema.

An overproduction of phlegm is a major issue in allergic rhinitis. In TCM, the malfunctioning of the spleen qi causes an overproduction of phlegm and damp. Spleen qi deficiency can be caused by over-thinking, poor eating habits, and the consumption of foods that contribute to "dampness" and "phlegm" within the body. Foods that can aggravate the digestive system are greasy, fried, spicy and cold foods, as well as sweets, dairy products and alcohol.

## Treatment

Several studies have been conducted to assess the effects of acupuncture on allergic rhinitis. A recent meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials (RCTs) of allergic rhinitis (hay fever) of 13 studies that included a total of 2365 participants (1126 as treatment group and 1239 as control) shows that the acupuncture treatment group had significantly reduced nasal symptoms, medications taken for allergies and serum IgE (the antibodies that play a major role in allergies) compared to the control group. Acupuncture was also shown to improve the Quality of Life in patients with allergic rhinitis. In short, acupuncture can effectively and safely treat hay fever!

The ideal time to treat seasonal allergic rhinitis using acupuncture is to begin treatments at least one month before symptoms normally start. While some patients may experience immediate relief after only a few treatments, a course of six to ten treatments once per week is normally required to treat acute conditions. Chronic conditions may require further treatment.

In the meantime massaging a few acupoints several times a day may provide temporary relief from nasal congestion: Yintang (located right between the eyebrows, the 'bindi' point), Yinxiang or LI 20 (located on the nasolabial groove adjacent to the nostrils), Hegu or LI4, (located on the back of the hand between the thumb and index finger) and Taichong. LV 3 is on the top of the foot, in the valley or webbing between the large toe and second toes. This powerful point balances the Liver meridian, all energy that flows up the body, and relieves all kinds of allergic reactions, especially bloodshot eyes.

Acupuncture treatments may be used year-round, even if your allergies only occur in certain seasons or in the presence of certain allergens. Any underlying deficiencies will be addressed when there are no active symptoms, to reduce or prevent a recurrence when the allergy season does arrive.

**Dietary recommendations:** According to Chinese Medicine, 'phlegm is produced in the stomach but stored in the lungs.' This is why diet plays an important role when combating allergies. Restrict your consumption of dairy products, refined sugar, alcohol, caffeine and fatty foods, in an effort to keep the body from producing too much phlegm. Phlegm can worsen the symptoms of allergic rhinitis. Drink plenty of water; chrysanthemum tea and goji berries can help improve eye symptoms.

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