

East Meets West

By Richard Esquivel, L.Ac., MTCM and Marvin Masada, M.D.

This is the second in a series of articles designed to compare and contrast Eastern and Western therapies to common clinical conditions. This month's article will focus on allergic rhinitis.

Allergic Rhinitis

Allergic rhinitis, or “hay-fever,” season is upon us. With it comes the sneezing, runny noses, itchy eyes, and other symptoms that make millions of people miserable this time of year. Since Claritin is now over-the-counter, allergy sufferers have a non-sedating treatment option without needing a prescription or seeing a doctor. However, for those with health insurance, it is harder to get oral prescription drugs--often co-payments have gotten higher and patients must fail a non-prescription drug first. Medications target the body's chemicals, namely histamine and leukotrienes that are responsible for allergy symptoms. Oral medications (i.e. anti-histamines, montelukast), nasal sprays (i.e. nasal steroids, azelastine), anti-histamine eye drops, or combinations of the above are used to treat allergic rhinitis. Occasionally, your doctor may choose to give an injection of “cortisone” (steroids). Allergy shots, composed of mixtures of allergy-causing triggers, are very effective in training the body not to be allergic, especially for those who are not helped by medications.

The Chinese understanding of allergic rhinitis is an invasion of pathogenic factors, such as Wind, Cold, or Heat (ie: allergens) on the body's defensive qi, or Wei qi. (Qi is often translated as “energy” but is more accurately understood as “vital air”.) There is often a deficiency of the defensive qi which is often associated with a deficiency of the qi of the Lung and/or Kidneys which lies at the root of the disorder. Treatment of allergic rhinitis consists of expelling pathogenic factors and tonifying the body's defensive qi. This is accomplished with appropriate acupuncture needling and herbal medicine to suppress the allergic response and decrease the symptoms associated with allergies. Acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine can be very effective in controlling allergic symptoms with minimal side effects. One Western herb in particular, stinging nettle leaf, is extremely effective in controlling symptoms of allergies and patients often report it to be equally effective as the most commonly used prescription allergy medications with fewer side effects.

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