HEALTH

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TCM: in the nose

I sneeze a lot and my nose is often runny and congested, particularly in spring and winter. Can TCM help?

A sneeze acts like a cough in that it is an attempt to eliminate irritations of the nose and throat. But frequent bouts of sneezing are annoying and – in TCM – can harm the body. Sneezing becomes a problem in conditions such as allergic rhinitis when it is accompanied with nasal congestion and an itchy, runny nose. During episodes, excess watery discharge runs from the nose or down to the throat, and the sense of smell is affected.

In TCM, nasal reactions are due to internal disharmony which makes the nose susceptible to external stimulation, such as pollen, dust, sudden changes in weather and even spicy foods. Three organ systems can be involved in the development of allergic rhinitis. The nose is considered the opening for the lungs on to the body surface, so lung disorders affect the nose directly. The spleen is the source of chi and blood which ensures that the lungs keeps the nasal passages clear and TCM views the kidney system as the root of life's activities, so these have to work well for the body to function efficiently.

Lung weakness is indicated by frequent sneezing and an itchy, congested and runny nose. People with weak lungs tend to be sensitive to low temperatures and regularly catch colds. Herbs to reinforce the lung include astragalus root, pilose asiabell root and ginseng.

Spleen weakness is indicated by a worsening in nasal congestion and persistent runny nose with occasional sneezing. Polyps may grow inside the nasal canal. Those with spleen weakness suffer from headaches, fatigue and

sensitivity to low temperatures. Their tongues may look pale and bulky. Physicians use herbs such as astragalus root, poria and largehead atractylodes rhizome to reinforce the spleen and regulate the lung.

Kidney weakness is indicated by persistent nasal problems mostly present in the morning and night. Sufferers tend to be sensitive to cold, look pale, feel low in spirit, have lumbar soreness and frequent night urination. Herbs such as processed rehmannia rhizome, Chinese yam and cornus fruit can warm the kidney and improve overall functioning of the body.

The above approaches are effective in reducing attacks of allergic rhinitis as well as the severity of the symptoms. TCM regards external triggers of this condition as "wind pathogens" since these are prevalent in spring with its preponderance of airborne pollen. At these times, herbs such as ledebouriella root, biond magnolia flower and cicada slough can improve nasal condition.

Generally, those with allergic rhinitis are in a cold syndrome pattern, which means warming methods will benefit them. TCM suggests rubbing the nose with the hands to promote blood and chi flow in the region: first knead the sides of the nose with fingers and then rub along the nasal grooves to warm up for two minutes.

Moxibustion in conjunction with herbal dressings is a traditional preventive approach for allergic conditions. TCM physicians prescribe warming herbs such as white mustard seed, gingers, gansui root, liquorice root and cassia bark; these are made into a paste and applied to acupoints on the back, then warmed with moxibustion for one to two hours to generate a local irritation on the area. This preventive method aims to generate local reactions such as blisters or redness on the skin because it's believed this can improve the internal environment of the body. The remedies are applied on three hot days in summer to help prevent the onset of a seasonal allergy.

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