

HEALTH

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TCM: Cold comfort

The approaching cold weather bodes ill for those prone to colds and flu. A traditional Chinese herb, *huang qi*, is commonly used in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) to regulate the immune function and help prevent these common ailments. The tonic ingredient is usually used in autumn and winter to nourish and tone the body.

Huang qi, also known as astragalus root, is the dried root of perennial herb scientific astragalus membranaceus. It's mainly grown in Inner Mongolia, Gansu and Heilongjiang provinces. The herb is sweet and slightly warm in nature and manifests its therapeutic actions in the spleen and lung meridians.

Astragalus can replenish *qi* and promote its functions. TCM practitioners use it for treating a variety of conditions. As TCM believes that everything results from the movement and change of *qi*, it's the vital substance constituting the body and aids in the functioning of the organs and meridians.

Qi circulates through the organs, muscles, skin and meridians, providing the power source for all vital activities. A deficiency of *qi* generally presents shortness of breath, fatigue, weakness, and even organ prolapse.

In TCM, *qi* deficiency in the superficial parts of the body leads to spontaneous perspiration, a vulnerable immune system and exterior pathogenic infections such as the flu. A traditional herbal formula called "Jade-screen Powder", which consists of astragalus



Huang qi or astragalus root

root as the main ingredient, can be used for invigorating *qi* and consolidating the body surface to arrest perspiration and prevent infection.

In addition, astragalus root can promote digestive functions in individuals experiencing paleness, fatigue, loss of appetite and loose bowels due to a spleen deficiency. It's the herb of choice for treating organ prolapse along with bupleurum root, bugbane rhizome and immature bitter orange. It can also be used for urinary difficulty and relieving edema such as in nephritis and cardiac failure. The herb is also a prime ingredient for treating sores and ulcers, helping to drain pus and promote tissue regeneration.

Pharmacological studies show that astragalus root possesses some unique compounds. The immune-stimulating properties lie in the polysaccharides

present in the herb, while its anti-oxidant activity is attributed to the flavonoids.

In one animal study, astragalus root was found to stimulate the production of some immuno-proteins and improve the immune response.

An exceptional high dosage of astragalus root can be used to treat post-stroke complications such as hemiplegia. A clinical study has also demonstrated that it significantly improves left ventricular function after heart attacks through the protective effect of the flavonoids.

Astragalus root can be used in cooking. The Chinese add it when roasting poultry, baking dates or black beans, and even for brewing. Many believe that long-term consumption of the root can promote general well-being and prevent ageing.

Here's a recipe for soup that's believed to boost the immune system. Take one spring chicken (chopped in large pieces), 30g astragalus sticks, eight red dates, one tablespoon of wolfberries, 100ml rice wine, green onion and fresh ginger (finely sliced for garnish) and place in a double-boiler. Add water and steam for three hours. Add salt to taste before serving.

Rose Se and Jenny Eagleton are with Integrated Chinese Medicine Holdings (icm.com.hk). Before taking any medicine consult your TCM or medical practitioner