

HEALTH

Edited by Susan Schwartz
susan.schwartz@scmp.com

TCM: Bellflower power

Platycodon root, commonly called Chinese bellflower or balloon flower (*jie geng*), is an essential herb in TCM. Its root has numerous qualities that make it popular for the treatment of abscesses, respiratory and intestinal disorders, and injuries.

In TCM, it acts on the lung meridian to clear phlegm, relieve coughs and help the dispersing function of the lungs. It also raises the *qi* of the lungs and large intestine, and clears toxins and heat in the formation of pus and abscesses.

Platycodon is one of the essential ingredients in apricot kernel and perilla leaf powder (*xing su san*) used for relieving coughs caused by upper respiratory tract infections and in draining the pus (*pai nong san*) which promotes abscess formation.

It has become better known for its application in inflammatory lung conditions; when combined with wild buckwheat rhizome and Herba Houttuyniae, it can help cure lung abscesses. It is described as the

principal herb for diseases of the lungs, mouth or throat. When taken together, platycodon root and liquorice root are excellent in alleviating sore throats and hoarseness. The root is also an excellent ingredient to help professional singers protect their voice, and is traditionally combined with fresh rhemannia root, figwort root, dwarf lily-turf tuber and fragrant Solomon's seal rhizome.

Fresh platycodon root is also eaten in China and Korea. It is one of the main vegetables used for making kimchi in Korea. The roots are usually blanched before being used as food to remove the bitter taste. However, when preparing the medicinal herb, they are only washed briefly, to prevent the loss of active constituents.

The usual dosage of platycodon is about three to nine grams per day. There are two well-known adverse reactions that can occur when ingesting the root: nausea and fatigue due to the destruction of red blood cells.

This has been observed in laboratory experiments with platycodin extracted from platycodon roots when the dosage is excessively high, but these have not been reported from clinical use. Generally, platycodon root is considered as safe as ginseng.

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