

Online Articles

Treating the *Common Cold*

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Treating the Common Cold

What do I do for a cold?

"What do I do for a cold?" It seems that no matter how often we experience the familiar symptoms of body chills, upper respiratory congestion, headache, neck and shoulder stiffness and possible fever we are still often unprepared and in a quandary as to what is the best treatment.

Feeling invulnerable and unaware of stress and dietary causes, the average American experiences approximately 5.6 respiratory illnesses each year and young children, a startling 8.3! [1] In fact the common cold, [2] as one of a class of upper respiratory diseases, accounts for 60% of all diseases.

With all the recent high tech advances of modern medicine and the billions of dollars spent on research of far more complex and serious diseases such as cancer, one might at least expect a cure for the common cold. Not so easy, since there are more than 200 viruses, numbers of bacteria and even some fungi that can cause cold-like respiratory problems. Because of this, it is not likely that a vaccine can be developed for the common cold. This is particularly true since more than any other disease, a cold represents a complex series of energetic metabolic imbalances as well as various pathogenic causes often unique to each patient.

Coryza, as the common cold is called in medical jargon, is considered a minor self-limiting illness mostly occurring during the autumn and winter with chills and dampness being predisposing factors. The standard medical treatment is to spend a day or

two in bed and take soluble aspirin 0.6 grams every 6 hours or so to alleviate the minor discomforting symptoms.

A Holistic Approach

Considering that not everyone who is exposed to cold pathogens, necessarily catches a cold, the deeper cause must exist at the level of our immune system. This system can be in either a fundamentally deficient or overly stressed state. The general maintenance of the immune system according to Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) is controlled by a defined non-organ function that coordinates the functions of all the internal organ processes called the 'triple warmer'. [3] This organ system can become out of balance as a result of the excess consumption of overly refined foods, lack of sleep, emotional stress, exposure to damp and/or cold.

Another factor to consider is that living and sleeping in overly heated homes with lack of ventilation, does not allow our Triple Warmer to help us make the proper adjustment to outer climatic conditions. As a result, we literally "catch a chill" when we step outside during the Winter months.

We must confess that there are in fact few cures for any disease, including the common cold. It was Hippocrates, the father of Western medicine who first observed how despite all our supposed cures and remedies, "the body cures itself." Given this, treatments and remedies generally focus on either managing the symptoms of discomfort, or ideally to facilitate and optimize the body's ability to heal itself. In natural medicine this is done mainly through the use of dietary restrictions, herbs, various physio-therapeutic methods such as inducing perspiration and of course, plenty of recuperative rest.

This is no great news for the impatient or self important, who feel that under no circumstances can the relentless high-stress pace of his or her daily life be interrupted because of an unexpected cold. It is for such an individual that Western pharmaceutical medicine offers over-the-counter drugs in the form of various antihistamines. Unfortunately, while they may temporarily relieve cold-symptoms, they may also have undesirable side effects of either drowsiness or excitement, lethargy, fatigue and even possible cardiovascular collapse or respiratory arrest. Hardly a bargain in exchange for a cold!

From the perspective of holistic health, antihistamines insult the body's life force and may have a negative impact in facilitating its ability to properly cleanse and regain health. When a cold finally quits with such treatment, it is more an expression of despair in convincing its host of the need to detoxify, slow down and rest. Assuming the prerequisite rest, judicious fasting or dietary limitations, herbs and other natural therapies can give our body the strength it needs to fully cleanse and recover.

A Home Herbal Immune Stimulant

Boosting the Immune System

One excellent cold and flu remedy that you can make at home consists of five herbs: echinacea, golden seal, garlic, chapparal and Chinese astragalus root. Scientific research has been able to confirm powerful immunostimulatory capabilities of several herbs and this combination can be used both as a powerful blood purifier as well as a tonic for the immune system.

How do these herbs stimulate the immune system? Echinacea (all species), today the most popular North American herb, has been shown to be both bacteriostatic and anti-viral. [4] Golden seal root (*Hydrastis canadensis*) has powerful effects in drying the mucous membranes and inhibiting a wide range of hostile microorganisms. Chaparral (*Larrea divaricata*) has strong anti-microbial activity and has been shown to reduce inflammation of the respiratory and intestinal tract. [5] Garlic (*Allium sativum*) contains allicin which has been shown to be not only antibacterial but antiviral against influenza virus. [6], [7] The powerful deep immunostimulating properties of astragalus (*Astragalus membranaceus*) will be discussed further on.

To make your own herbal immune stimulant and cold and flu remedy, combine these herbs in equal amounts and blend approximately four ounces of the combination in a pint of gin or vodka. Allow to stand in a wide mouthed jar, shaking it daily. After at least two weeks, strain and bottle for use. Average dose consists of 30 drops to a 1 teaspoon two or three times daily more or less as needed. During an acute condition, I recommend taking a

teaspoon steeped in a half cup of boiling water every hour or two.

Diaphoretics

The second approach to effectively treat a cold or flu is to induce perspiration. Herbs classified as diaphoretics and warming stimulants greatly assist the body throwing off the external invading pathogen through the pores of the skin. Herbal stimulants that are also effective against colds and flu include ginger root (*Zingiber officinale*), cayenne pepper (*Capsicum frutescens*), cinnamon (*Cinnamomum cassia*) and garlic (*Allium sativum*). Diaphoretic herbs include boneset (*Eupatorium perfoliatum*), elder flowers (*Sambucus nigra*), yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*), lemon balm (*Melissa officinalis*) and peppermint (*Mentha piperita*).

Boneset was a once popular herb for influenza and fevers. It held official drug status in the US from 1820 to 1950. It is diaphoretic, febrifuge (gets rid of fevers), emetic (in large doses), and laxative. In mild, moderate doses it is diaphoretic, especially when taken in warm infusion. Steep one oz. of the dried herb to 1 pint of boiling water. Take a half cup every hour or two during an acute stage of cold or fever. After five doses or so, it should induce perspiration.

The popular name was inspired from its great value in treating a particular type of fever ("dengue") with attendant bone pain called "breakbone" that prevailed in the US during the 19th century. It is still widely used for treating colds and influenza by British medical herbalists specifically for the treatment of influenza and fever. Because of its bitter, somewhat nauseant taste, it has fallen into recent neglect but considering the increasing virulence of influenza viruses that have been visited upon us in recent times, it seems worth reconsidering the use of this old-time cold and influenza remedy.

Choosing a Remedy

So what do we need to know to choose an appropriate treatment for the common cold? From the standpoint of energetic Chinese medicine, a cold can be caused by weakness of the *wei chi* or external immune system. There are also different 'preferred' treatments for treating individuals who are constitutionally weaker or stronger as well as treating cold-like symptoms that seem to linger over a period of weeks.

Now let's look at some individual herbal remedies.

Astragalus

If an individual tends to be one of those who catches cold frequently, treatment between each bout should be to strengthen the immune system. Described as "internal cold" by TCM, the condition is generally characterized by a lowered hypo-metabolic condition (yin). *Astragalus membranaceus*, called *huang chi* is the most specific herb for strengthening the surface immune system. *Astragalus* can be taken alone each day either in tea or with rice porridge. I recommend purchasing this important Chinese tonic herb by the pound so that it is always available to use as a dietary supplement.

It is sold neatly sized and packaged, resembling yellow colored tongue depressors. As with many Chinese herbs, but more especially *astragalus*, there are many different grades from which to choose. Ideally this process will be facilitated by knowing your supplier. Quality is determined partially by its larger size, the depth of yellow color and most definitively by a noticeable 'sweetish' flavor when a piece of the root is chewed.

About 6 to 15 grams is taken or for convenience, around three or four slices, of the root can be simmered alone or with fresh ginger in a half quart of water for approximately 30 to 45 minutes. This can then be used as tea or you can use it as stock for soup or to cook cereal or rice. Traditionally most Chinese families serve it in Winter to the entire family in soup once a week whether any of them immediately need it or not, somewhat like the way some Westerners regularly take a daily multi vitamin. For those who are actively working on strengthening their immune system, it should be taken regularly once or twice daily over a period of weeks or months as needed.

Because it has a metabolically warming and drying nature, *astragalus* is not recommended to use if there is any accompanying acute inflammation, fever, or noticeable dryness of the skin and mucous membranes. In general it is best to use it inter currently when the disease is not in its most actively inflamed and acute stage.

Ginger

Fresh ginger by itself is another good all purpose remedy for the first stages of the common cold. By gently stimulating the body's vitality and promoting diaphoresis (perspiration), fresh ginger tea with a teaspoon of honey or succanat [8] is an excellent remedy for the early stages of a cold, fever or cough. Drinking ginger tea by steeping a few slices of the fresh root in a cup of water, adding honey or succanat to taste is an effective way to reduce the accumulation of phlegm and mucus that often precedes a cold.

Garlic

Similarly, one can receive benefit from taking garlic and honey tea. Garlic contains specific properties that are both antibiotic and antiviral as well as its ability to relieve congestion by stimulating circulation and activating the immune system. This is simply made by crushing a clove or two of fresh garlic and pouring a cup of boiling water over it to steep, perhaps adding the juice of one fresh lemon and honey or succanat to taste.

In my own experience, I like to make fresh garlic oil by blending several cloves of peeled garlic in olive oil. A teaspoon of this is then taken every hour or two not only to relieve the immediate cold symptoms but because of the anti-biotic and anti-viral properties of garlic, to at least help prevent the spread of the inflammation. Garlic oil is very effective for coughs as well as earaches. For the ears, simply moisten a wad of cotton and put it into each ear before retiring. Relief is usually overnight.

Boiled Warm Water

One of the simplest treatments is to fast and take only boiled warm water for the first two or three days of a cold. This at least allows the body to receive a complete metabolic rest and occasionally speeds the body's healing and lessens the feeling of accompanying congestion. Many sages such as the Dalai Lama of Tibet, make a habit of drinking one glass of plain boiled warm water each day to maintain health. This approach is certainly the most economic and is a recourse that is usually available to us when traveling or when our usual herbs or foods are unavailable.

Ginger, garlic and boiled water all fulfill the fundamental prerequisite strategy for treating the common cold, to induce stimulation of the surface capillaries and break the cold by inducing perspiration. As previously stated, herbs that are classified either as surface stimulants or diaphoretics such as elder, mint, lemon balm, oregano, yarrow, ginger, cinnamon, cayenne pepper and garlic are used. The addition of succanat or honey can serve as a valuable component of treatment because it helps to replenish and nourish the energy that is consumed with the use of herbal stimulants and diaphoretics.

This is especially important for some vegetarians who may lack any nutritional reserve and generally respond poorly to the use of herbal stimulants and diaphoretics that disperse internal energy to the surface. These individuals also respond especially poorly to the use of antihistamines and antibiotics that consume some of the body's reserves.

Composition Powder

A favorite old-time North American remedy used by the 19th century Thompsonian and Eclectic herb doctors is called *Composition Powder*. This was evidently a favorite of Dr. Nowell, who was one of the major teachers of the late herbalist belovedly known as Dr. Christopher. Dr. Nowell's formula for Composition Powder is as follows:

| | |
|--|------------|
| Powder of bayberry bark (myrica cer.) | 4 ounces |
| Powder of ginger (zingiberis) | 2 ounces |
| Powder of white pine bark (pinus canad.) | 1 ounce |
| Powder of cloves (caryophyllum) | 1 teaspoon |
| Powder of cayenne pepper (capsicum) | 1 teaspoon |

The ingredients are mixed and sifted. The dose is one teaspoonful steeped in a cup of hot or boiling water sweetened with raw brown sugar or honey. Cover and allow it to stand until cool enough to drink the clear liquid, leaving the powder.

Evidently upper respiratory complaints were at least as prevalent in the 19th and early 20th centuries. It was Dr. Nowell's most commonly prescribed herbal formula. He states: "We have made and used Composition Powder for over forty years --- we regularly mixed it in batches of sixty pounds -- As a remedy in colds, beginning of fevers, flu, hoarseness, sluggish circulation, colic cramps, etc. we believe it has done more good than any other single preparation ever known to man --- If this compound were kept in every home, and used as the occasion arose, there would be far less sickness. Give it freely in your practice

and your patient will bless you."[9]

Herbal Uprising

Since each doctor happened to have his or her own favorite version of this formula, mine is a Planetary formula called "Herbal Uprising" and consists of the following:

| | |
|----------------------------|---------|
| Powder of ginger root | 8 parts |
| Powder of cinnamon twig | 4 parts |
| Powder of white pine bark | 2 parts |
| Powder of cloves | 1 part |
| Powder of bayberry bark | 1 part |
| Powder of marshmallow root | 1 part |
| Powder of licorice root | 1 part |

It is taken similarly to composition powder previously described but I feel the addition of licorice and marshmallow root gives it a smoother action.

Cayenne Pepper

In his years of practice and teaching Dr. Christopher carried on the earlier Thompsonian use of cayenne pepper (*Capsicum frutescens*) as a simplification of the therapeutic effects of using Composition powder. He recommended taking a dose of 1/2 to 1 teaspoon of cayenne pepper two or three times daily and more often if treating a cold. While this can have a mildly harsh effect on the gut of sensitive individuals, it is generally a safe common folk remedy for the treatment and prevention of colds and other upper respiratory complaints. It may be taken alone or mixed with a little olive oil to soothe its passage through the digestive tract. Interestingly, cayenne pepper is taken by certain African natives on a daily basis to prevent sickness.

Elder Flowers, Mint and Yarrow Tea

One of the most common herbal remedies described in several contemporary herb books consists of a combination of equal parts elderflowers, yarrow and peppermint. If you don't mind the flavor, boneset may be added to this combination because of its specific anti-influenza properties. One ounce of the combination of these herbs is steeped in two cups of boiling water, covered and allowed to steep until cool enough to drink. It may be sweetened with raw brown sugar or honey to taste. One or two cups are taken before retiring. Several bed covers should also be provided to further help induce perspiration. If taken at early onset, I have personally seen this tea work wonders.

Lemon Balm

Lemon balm (*Melissa officinalis*) tea is a pleasant tasting relaxing diaphoretic that is especially suitable for treating colds and flu of children as well as most adults. It has the added benefit of helping to calm the restlessness associated with colds and some fevers in young children.

Citrus Tea

In so far as adding citrus to one's cold regime, if you are sure of having organic unsprayed citrus, juicing and boiling the entire fruit, rind and all, is the most effective. While the inner pulp of citrus has a cool, moist energy, it is balanced by the warming and drying quality of the outer rind (the part usually discarded). A simple tea of grapefruit rind is also a good treatment today for mucus associated with colds and sinus congestion.

Traditional Chinese Herbal Medicine

Traditional Chinese Medicine has several formulas that effectively treat colds. Interestingly enough, most of these are similar to those previously described, not so much in terms of the individual herbs that are used, but the basic therapeutic principle of treatment being to stimulate circulation and induce perspiration.

Cinnamon Twig Tea

Cinnamon Twig Tea (Gui Zhi Tang) was first described in the most important clinical manual of TCM composed by Chang Chung Ching (A.D. 142-220). It consists of the following:

| | |
|---|---------|
| Cinnamon Twig (cinnamon cassia) | 6-9 gm. |
| White peony (<i>paeonia lactiflora</i>) | 6-9 gm. |

| | |
|--|------------|
| Fresh ginger (zingiberis off.) | 3-6 gm. |
| Honey baked licorice (glycyrrhiza sp.) | 3-6 gm. |
| Jujube dates (Zizyphus jujube) | 3 to 5 pc. |

This combination is especially suitable for patients of a more delicate or frail constitution. After taking one or two cups of the tea, one should retire to bed to sweat. It should then be followed by a bowl of rice porridge a half hour or so after sweating to replenish any lost vitality.

The *Shang Han Lun* of Chang Chung Ching, from which this formula is taken, was essentially dedicated to treating colds and other contagious diseases caused by cold. The reason as stated by Chang in his preface, "two-thirds of my relatives (more than two hundred) succumbed to disease, seven-tenths of which (deaths) were due to an epidemic fever." Evidently colds leading to more serious upper respiratory problems were also an issue in 2nd century China as well.

Medical inefficiency must also have been a problem since part of the intent of the book was to reform 2nd century Chinese medical practice. The *Shang Han Lun* consists of some 113 predominantly herbal formulas originally intended to treat acute, externally contracted disease such as colds, flu and fevers. Their therapeutic efficacy has since been more deeply understood and broadened so that they have become the core formulas of clinical Chinese herbalism as well as Japanese Kanpo herb medicine.

TCM tends to differentiate constitutionally between delicate, medium or strong patients. Delicate patients tend to be underweight, colder, frailer and more susceptible to external diseases. Medium patients have a medium build and are neither pronouncedly delicate or excessive in build. Strong patients tend to have a large bodily frame, strong, excessive manner and less vulnerable to cold.

Pueraria Decoction

While Cinnamon twig formula followed by rice porridge is for the delicate patient, *Ge gan tang* (Pueraria decoction) is for the patient of medium strength. It has many widespread uses, especially for accompanying symptoms of stiffness or tightness of the shoulders and neck, one of the specific uses for pueraria, popularly known as Kudzu. Pueraria combination consists of the following:

| | |
|---------------|-------------|
| Pueraria | 6-9 gm. |
| Ephedra | 6-9 gm. |
| Cinnamon twig | 6-9 gm. |
| White peony | 6-9 gm. |
| Dried ginger | 3 gm. |
| Licorice | 3 gm. |
| Jujube dates | 3 to 5 pcs. |

This is slowly simmered in 2 or 3 cups of boiling water for 30 minutes in a covered non-metallic vessel. One cup is taken two or three times daily.

Ma Huang

The TCM formula for the strong constitution patient with larger bodily frame and seeming "energy to burn". It therefore uses Ma Huang (ephedra) as the major adrenal stimulant to induce perspiration. This formula can also be used to prevent and treat acute asthmatic attacks. It consists of:

| | |
|----------------------|---------|
| Ma huang (ephedra) | 6-9 gm. |
| Cinnamon twig | 6-9 gm. |
| Apricot seed | 6-9 gm. |
| Honey baked licorice | 3-6 gm. |

Bupleurum and Cinnamon Combination

One of Chang Chung Ching's formulas that is particularly useful for treating the common cold is called Bupleurum and Cinnamon Combination (*Chai hu kwei chih tang*). It consists of the following Chinese herbs:

| | |
|-------------|---------|
| Bupleurum | 4.0 gm. |
| Pinellia | 4.0 gm. |
| Licorice | 1.5 gm. |
| Jujube | 2.0 gm. |
| Cinnamon | 2.5 gm. |
| Scutellaria | 2.0 gm. |
| Ginseng | 2.0 gm. |
| Peony | 2.5 gm. |
| Ginger | 1.0 gm. |

This formula is good for those with a somewhat delicate constitution who have a tendency towards fatigue, gastrointestinal weakness, headache, heaviness in the head, neuralgia, fever, chills, floating pulse, distention beneath the heart. It is primarily used for treating the common cold, influenza, pneumonia, tuberculosis and pleuritis.

Green Onion

Chinese herbal medicine is based on a rich unbroken herbal folk tradition. Just as I mentioned the use of garlic tea for the treatment of colds besides using simple fresh ginger tea, Chinese folk medicine uses the milder white bulbs of green onions (scallions) to treat the common cold and accompanying headache. One remedy uses 1 or 2 ounces of the lower white portion of scallions, with a few slices of fresh ginger steeped in a covered cup of water for 20 or 30 minutes. One or two cups is taken before retiring.

Chinese Patented Cold Remedies

Gan Mao Pian***Yin Chiao San***

Two patented Chinese herb formulas I like to have on hand are *Gan Mao Pian* and *Yin Chiao San*. These are in the form of herbal tablets available from Chinese herb pharmacies especially useful for treating symptoms of cold and flu. *Gan mao* in Chinese specifically refers to the common cold. These pills consist of herbs with antibiotic and antiviral properties that are very effective, not only for treatment, but to take occasionally for prevention during peak cold and flu season. *Yin Chiao San* is an herbal compound containing honeysuckle and forsythia blossoms, two herbs used by the Chinese because of their strong anti-inflammatory properties. It is particularly useful for treating influenza.

An Ayurvedic Remedy For Colds

Sito Paladi

In India, the vegetarian Hindus use a revered Ayurvedic preparation called *Sito Paladi Churna* for colds. This preparation depends on the use of certain herbs mixed with raw brown sugar to supplement nutritional energy. Most of the herbs in *sito paladi* are readily available and consists of the following: raw brown sugar, bamboo manna, pippli long pepper, cardamom and cinnamon. It is a primary anti-kapha or anti-mucus remedy especially good for internal coldness with accompanying clear or whitish mucus. This delicious preparation is available from Indian import stores and is readily taken by children and adults. The average dose is a teaspoon of the powder two to four times daily or as needed.

Bamboo manna (*phyllostachys nigra*) is the inner sap of bamboo. It is called *zhu li* in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) and is similarly used to clear inflammation and phlegm from the lungs. Pippli (piper longum) called *bi ba* in TCM, along with the other ingredients in *sito paladi* are hot and counterbalance the cooling energy of bamboo manna.

Although, not as preferred, one can substitute black pepper for pippli in this formula. These herbs tend to stimulate circulation and raise the body's resistance to external cold pathogens.

A simplification of this combination is readily made by combining powdered black pepper, cardamom, echinacea root (either purplea or angustifolia) and, if available, adding kudzu starch powder. The dried herbs should be finely powdered and mixed with warm honey to form a thick gopy consistency. In this form, it can be stored in a small wide mouthed jar and will keep indefinitely unrefrigerated. A teaspoon of this combination can be taken three or four times a day followed by a cup of boiled warm water.

What to Eat or not Eat When Treating a Cold

Resting the Digestive System

Finally, a question frequently asked is whether or not to eat during a cold. Usually one is not hungry but that mere fact may not be sufficient reason for some of the more glutinous to feel that they must eat no matter what. Considering that the object is to give the digestive and nervous system as much of a rest as possible, it is advised to eat as lightly as your particular frame and constitution will endure. If you are one of those frailer and more malnourished types, you should eat light nourishing soups or thin rice porridge. If you are more excess, complete fasting for a day or two, taking only tea or boiled warm water is in order. For the middling, thin rice porridge (or any warm whole grain cereal) is best. In general, black bean chili and rice soup with the addition of coriander, cumin seed, chili and garlic is a good dish to take when treating a cold or flu.

Since the beginning of recorded history, people have been vulnerable to occasional colds and flu. As a result there is a wealth of practical dietary and herbal wisdom for us to draw upon from many cultures. As we have seen, proper treatment of a cold can range from the simplest use of drinking boiled warm water to a complex Chinese herbal formula from the second century A.D. Once established, a cold might have to simply run its course. Even then, its duration and discomfort can be reduced considerably with therapeutic diet and herbs. Proper treatment will also help prevent what might at first be a simple common disease from developing into a more complicated life threatening problem.

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