My Favorite Herbal Remedies for Cold and Flu

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Once the weather begins to turn, I start to see more people in the clinic with symptoms of seasonal allergies, cold and flu. Chinese herbal formulas developed centuries ago remain popular today (although less well known in many corners of the U.S.) due to their almost inexplicable efficacy throughout the ages and are used regularly by health conscious individuals worldwide. Here is a list of my favorites as it has developed over time:

Yu Ping Feng

The best way to avoid a cold or flu is to stop it before it starts. That's why I have always given top billing to this formula. We pop this at the office whenever a potentially contagious rhinovirus or flu bug is suspected to be visiting us, and I also take it with me when I'm in crowded enclosed spaces for extended periods of time; e.g., plane and bus trips. It's also been reported that for children (or heck, adults for that matter) prone to recurring strep throat infections, a couple months' course of this seems to offer dependable prevention. Tablets may be crushed and added to warm water for those who have difficulty swallowing pills. It's likely also available as a tincture at Kan Herbs or others.

My current preferred source of Yu Ping Feng is Astra C from Health Concerns (Oakland, CA).

Yin Qiao San

Ancient Chinese secret? Not really. The herbal formula known widely as Yin Qiao (pronounced YIN CHOW or for purists YEEN CHOW), is renowned in Chinese Medicine not solely for curbing colds in the initial stages but, for preventing them and keeping them from manifesting as a full blown episode characterized by cough, itchy throat, watery eyes, mild fever, and runny nose. If you have the nature to develop sinus infections and respiratory infections in conjunction with the onset of a cold, Yin Qiao may prevent those complications. It's been proven that Yin Qiao can be taken as a preventative when exposure to conditions is imminent, typically at work or school. This is one formula to always have on hand (at home and at work). It will keep family members from missing school or work unnecessarily. For young children, tablets can be easily crushed and mixed with food.

I'm sure there are many good versions of this, but I first purchased Yin Qiao from NuHerbs (San Leandro, CA) and later gifted it to several folks to try. They were surprised at how well it worked (if they took it during that crucial "first signs/sx" window) and now always make sure they have supply on hand.

Gan Mao Ling

Gan Mao Ling may well be the number one best-seller patent medicine in China, based on its effectiveness for treatment of the common cold. While I personally have not tried it, in-the-know New Yorkers from all walks of life seem to swear by it, keeping a bottle in their medicine cabinet and taking some the minute they feel the first signs of a cold or flu coming on: a scratchy throat, feeling cold, sensitivity to wind, runny nose with clear phlegm. While I have always found Yin Qiao San to be incredibly effective at "nipping in the bud" and pretty much aborting any on-coming cold, these folks do that with Gan Mao Ling. Additionally, many report that it also helps to shorten the length of a cold the times they do end up getting one. (I use zinc lozenges for this, but to each her own!)

I have never myself used Gan Mao Ling (mostly because, I suppose, the two preventive measures (which I prefer) above have always worked so well. Good sources of Gan Mao Ling (although surely there are more than I give here) would include Kan Herbs and Mayway/Plum Flower.

If symptoms include nasal and sinus congestion, the formula can be taken with Bi Yan Pian. I'm not a huge fan of Bi Yan Pian and prefer instead Pueraria Clear Sinus and Magnolia Clear Sinus from Evergreen Herbs (City of Industry, CA).

If a sore throat occurs along with the cold, it can be taken with Chuan Xin Lian Jie Du Wan.

Here I prefer Clear Heat from Health Concerns, to which can be added if necessary, Astra Isatis or even Coptis Purge Fire. These herbal formulas are not meant to be taken more than a week or so, and I have found them to be most effective (assuming you have a rather strong constitution) if you take them at double or triple the recommended dose for 2-3 days. By then problem is solved, and you shouldn't need any more.

If there is accompanying nausea or diarrhea, Bao Ji Wan or Huo Xiang Zheng Qi Wan can be added.

I have never really understood Hua Xiang Zheng Qi Tang, but I realize there are folks who like it. I also prefer Bao Ji Wan (often called "Curing Pills") over the more classic Bao He Wan. And I am a huge fan of Health Concerns' formulation, Quiet Digestion. I am constantly surprised at how many people have discovered this as a night time sleep aid. 2-3 tablets are the right dosage for nearly everyone.

Te Xiao Bi Min Gan

Te Xiao Bi Min Gan can be effective for seasonal allergies. Both dissolve phlegm (especially nasal mucus), alleviate discharge and open the nasal passages. These formulas are recommended for

the inflammation and stuffiness associated with rhinitis, allergies, sinusitis, cold or flu, and they work quickly; without the drowsiness or side-effects associated with over the counter antihistamines. For some, one works better than the other. Many find that Te Xiao Bi Min Kan works better for symptoms that include itchy eyes and ears.

While I have seen this work quite well as a kind of antihistamine, over the years I have discovered that these inflammatory type allergy symptoms often have their root in the gut. So to really dare I say 'cure' yourself of these allergic issues you might have to work a bit deeper, perhaps with a naturopath or functional medicine practitioner who might be more conditioned or experienced to test and treat such things.

For clear cut phlegm issues I prefer Wen Dan Tang and Qing Qi Hua Tan Tang. Wen Dan also has an indication for insomnia even mood maintenance/depression for certain presentations whereas I have found Qing Qi to be an excellent companion formula to Xiao Yao San or Jia Wei Xiao Yao San in sort of improving/maintaining the unobstructed free flow of qi in otherwise health youngish adults. My father liked Health Concerns' Wen Dan formulation (he used it both for phlegm and as a sleep aid), which they sell as Clear Phlegm. I actually liked the super affordable versions of Qing Qi and Jia Wei Xiao Yao San from Active Herb (Anaheim, CA), but just about all of the aforementioned companies will have a version of these.

Mike Barr, a long ago Poz Senior Contributing Editor and founding member of and scribe for the Treatment Action Group (TAG), is a functional medicine practitioner, acupuncturist and herbalist in NYC. Reach out to him here.

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