May, the cruelest month for tree pollen allergy sufferers: does Chinese medicine offer an effective remedy?

May 29, 2011 By Mike Barr

I suspect this spring tree pollen annoyance happens in other cities besides ours, and I am still not sure whether this is a new phenomenon or just started affecting me and my contemporaries once we moved into our 40s. (Don't allergies typically subside in older age, rather than getting worse or appearing anew out of the blue?) I will do a little sleuthing today but also welcome other peoples' experiences, knowledge and survival tactics.

(Thomas Leo Ogren, author of Allergy-Free Gardening, wrote a very interesting Op-Ed in the Times last spring. If you have time or interest, access it here.)

My acupuncturist, at the time I first suffered from this, was trained in what is called medical acupuncture: MDs follow 300 hours of coursework and clinical training and are then permitted to perform acupuncture. Since he had not done the entire traditional Chinese medicine curriculum, his acu point repertory did not include, as I understand it now, many of the Stomach, Urinary Bladder and San Jiao/Gallbladder points (as well as a couple of Extra Points: Yu Yao and Qiu Hou) around the eye orbit or canthus, so perhaps that is why he never tried so-called 'local points' to address my condition. (I had always thought that reliance on local points, except in cases of pain or spasm, was kind of a lazy approach to diagnosis and treatment, but as I learn more about the neurochemical effects of sympathetic nerve stimulation of the skin, I am beginning to rethink this.)

And since he had not formally studied Chinese herbal medicine, he didn't seem to have a magical potion to offer me either, and instead counseled me to try prescription allergy meds (although he could not prescribe them since he was a foreign (the politically correct qualifier as of 2009 appears to be "internationally:" as in IMG) trained MD and had chosen not to become licensed in the U.S.), wash my eyes with baby shampoo, and to pick up some Stinging Nettle (*Urtica dioica*) capsules (reported to block histamine and reduce inflammation) at a health food store in my neighborhood---although it was never clear what the proper dose should be, even if it were to work.*

Needless to say, nothing really worked. Low-dose (one tiny red tab, 60 mg I believe) pseudofed (pseudoephedrine) actually turned out to be the most helpful: one in the morning, maybe another one around mid-day---but nothing after 2 p.m. if I were to stand a chance of sleeping at night. Washing face and hair more frequently than usual also seemed to help a bit. Washing eyes, even

with baby shampoo, provided the illusory immediate relief that only turned into a more frenetic and aggressive itch attack (much like what happens when you first start to rub them: it seems to be helping at first and then the itching becomes more intense and before you know it you're in up to your elbows!) a few minutes later. Antihistamine eye drops (Pheniramine maleate with a tad of Naphazoline HCl thrown in as 'redness remover'), specifically Opcon-A from Bausch & Lomb (especially if stored in a cool, dark fridge!) was certainly an immediate elixir---and didn't seem to make things worse as other proposed remedies did--but no long-term solution.

Over the years, a friend of mine and I have taken to planning simply to leave New York in late April and to return in June. But how many people have the luxury (if being unstably employed can be considered such) of doing that? Last year he was doing a job in Brazil; this year, working on a project in Miami. He says next year Miami will also be his escape hatch from the month of burning, swollen, dripping eyes in the Fashion district. But surely there must be a more practical solution. Why is my acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine failing me here? What am I missing?

* It is also reported to have blood thinning as well as diuretic effects and also to raise the risk of hypoglycemia. Its use is thus cautioned against in persons with diabetes. Pregnant and nursing women are also coached to stay away. My acupuncturist never told me any of this back then. I guess we all have to do our own due diligence in these matters. One internet source says the weed takes 30 days to start working. So much conflicting advice, so little time.

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