The New Menace

There is decent research on both nutrients (especially phytonutrients) and traditional herbal remedies and their supportive effects on lung health

June 8, 2023 By Mike Barr

Even if that ominous orange cloud does dissipate today as it is predicted to, I have a feeling this is not the last we will see of it. These last few years certainly had an apocalyptic feel to them. But fear not (as C. Brown's thumb-sucking bestie once thus spracht), there are things we can do.

Given a little more time, it might be interesting to see what measures people in, say, Dammam, Lahore, Dhaka, Delhi, take to mitigate against the effects of chronic poor air quality they have been subjected to for, as the BBC's Samira Hussain pointed out last night, far longer than the handful of days we have suffered— so far. (Lots of research papers here.)

China too has its share of cities known for their daily dypsneic difficulties. Surely some of the citizens must take advantage of their storied herbal medicine tradition— including foods as medicines— to support lung health, mustn't they?

There is decent research on a few key "herbs" (if you count pomello peel as an herb) and their ameloriative effects on lung health. Of course, these things are almost never used a single ingredients in these herbal medicine traditions; instead, they are brewed together both with other items that complement and balance the desired effects. The two or three classic Chinese herbal formulas that jump to mind are Bai He Gu Jin Tang ("Lily Bulb To Strengthen Metal" (i.e., the Lung)), Er Chen Tang ("Two Cured," because the two ingredients, citrus peel and pinellia, are aged) and Qing Qi Hua Tan Tang ("Clear the Qi and Transform Phlegm"), although only the first one classically "moistens and nourishes the lung," as the other two (both with pinellia as key ingredient) are more phlegm focused.

Oh, and how could I forget Sang Xing Tang ("Mulberry Leaf & Apricot Kernel")?

At this point in my herbal evolution, I have experimented with just about all of them, but not yet anything specific to our newest and latest apocalypse. In the category generally, my absolute faves have grown to include Ban Xia Hou Po Tang (a surprising and fascinating anxiolytic), Ban Xia Bai Zhu Tian Ma Tang (a terrific salvage or add-on therapy for treating many "excess" tinnitus types when Long Dan Xie Gan Tang or Wen Dan Tang do not seem to do the trick) and Sha Shen Mai Men Dong Tang, this last one fabulously useful in folks recovering from various coronavirus infections. None of these though, alas, is particularly indicated for the experience of working,

playing, dining and sleeping 24/7 at a campfire site.

What we really need here is a formula that supports the lungs' natural ability, in a word or two, to clean and repair.

A handful of more specialized respiratory formulas have been studied for their potential utility in asthma, COPD and even certain lung cancers. One of them, Qian Jin Wei Jing Tang (research paper on its effect against fine particulate matter here) contains Lu Gen (the rhizome of a marsh grass) and Dong Gua Zi (the seeds of a wax gourd also sometimes called winter melon), two substances specifically for clearing "heat" and "irritability" from the lungs. Another one, a proporietary formula called MSSM-002, was designed for specifically for asthma-type presentations. Still other teams have combined Qian Jin Wei Jing Tang with the aforementioned Mai Men Dong Tang.

Often overlooked or lumped in with China, Japan, Taiwan, South Korea–even Vietnam and Tibet– have their own herbal medicine traditions– many covered by national insurance programs.

Often overlooked (or lumped in with China), Japan and Taiwan have their own herbal medicine traditions (as do South Korea, Vietnam, Tibet and others), with Japan's differing substantially and Taiwan's (not unlike South Korea) appearing to adopt the best aspects of its two more domineering neighbors. The Japanese herbal medicine tradition is called Kampo, and a well-characterized formula for asthma there called Saiboku-to is made up of the "two cured" substances of Er Chen Tang— aged pinellia rhizome and tangerine peel— plus the anxiolytic duo Hou Po and Huang Bai, with ginseng, perilla leaf (recently shown to potently tamp down Th-17 pro-inflammatory immune responses), ginger, licorice, ginseng, and buplerum root.

To this is added, at times, black cumin seed, chamomile, cinnamon, cloves, rosemary, sage, spearmint and thyme. Not quite sure I would want all of these otherwise lovely culinary herbs in the same pot, but you get the idea.

One may browse Active Herb and Mayway Herbs (their Plum Flower label "teapills") to find many of these remedies quite affordably. Both sites let you browse by condition, although the Mayway site is a tiny bit trickier: from the Products tab you'll need to scroll down to "By Condition" and then over/down to "Respiratory Support" (or just click here). There you will be greeted with a dizzying menu of what I counted as seventeen sub-categories. For the purposes of wildfire smoke/fine particulant matter, most folks will want to follow the sub-heads that focus on Moisten, Nourish and Transform Phlegm & Dissipate, Transform Phlegm & Clear Heat, or Transform Phlegm & Moisten Dryness. Navigating this way will cause you to miss these two guys those: Qing Fei Yi

Huo Wan and Bu Fei Wan.

For now, I will add in a nice table I got from the only true North American-based (Oriental) herbal scholar I am aware of, Subhuti Dharmananda, from his excellent Institute for Traditional Medicine site, that summarizes, specifically, herbs indicated for their function of “Moistening the Lungs” and “Clearing Heat.” The Toxin-Dispelling and Phlegm-Transforming/Dissipating list will come soon, but these here are lovely, lovely (even celestial (“Tian” actually means heavenly) and delicate) herbs.

Chinese Pinyin Name	Latin Name (part used)	Traditional Description of Actions
Zhi Mu	Anemarrhena asphodeloides (immature branch root)	Clear heat, moisten dryness
Tian Men Dong	Asparagus lucidus (tuber)	Clear heat, moisten dryness, nourish Yin
Bei Mu	Fritillaria cirrhosa/thunburgii (bulb)	Moisten dryness to resolve phlegm, clear heat
Bai He	Lilium brownnii (bulb)	Moisten lung, nourish Yin
Mai Men Dong	Ophiopogon japonicus (bulb)	Moisten dryness, clear heat, nourish Yin
Yu Zhu	Polygonatum officinale (rhizome)	Clear heat, moisten dryness, nourish Yin

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In addition to the citrus peels (Ju Hong, Chen Pi, Qing Pi, Zhi Ke, Zhi She, Fo Shou), one might look for fritillaria (Bei Mu), trichosanthes (Gua Lou or snake gourd, and especially the seed, Gua Lou Ren) and a particular marsh reed rhizome (Rhizoma phragmitis or Lu Gen in Pinyin Chinese) as ingredients historically useful for detoxification of the lung.

In addition to the citrus peels, other ingredients one might look for for detoxification of the lung are fritillaria (Bei Mu), trichosanthes (Gua Lou) and the marsh reed rhizome, phragmitis (Lu Gen).

Of course, we live in the 21st century now, and we have more, shall we say, "evidence-based," measures we can take (although not always or automatically superior to the older ones). In addition to assuring a healthful omega-3:omega-6 fatty acid ratio, there are other, rather boring old stand-bys like vitamin D and magnesium that, especially when asthmatic symptoms are present, one would be wise to assure adequate (even more than adequate) levels. (It's nearly impossible to get the required intake of vitamin D, magnesium, even zinc and often idodine, without supplementing. At least that's the mantra in my functional/nutritional medicine world.)

Finally, at our Fullscript site, I particularly like Kan Herbs' "Great White Lung Formula" (an alcohol-based tincture), Gaia's "Daily Lung Formula," (although more for phlegm) and Metagenics' "Andrographis Plus" (basically, the TCM formula Sang Xing Tang (White Mulberry Leaf & Apricot Kernel Formula), for gently moistening & dispersing, with added andrographis & amla fruit aka Indian gooseberry).

I am kind of defensively old school and still prefer the tablets and granule powders (tinctures are okay but tend to be quite weak), especially from the companies that have been around since almost the 1970's! Oakland, CA -based Health Concerns was a key go-to until the company was sold (during Covid financial crunch) and, in turn, ruined. If I become insanely wealthy one day, I will run straight to Andrew Gaeddert and see if there might be a way to help him get his company back. In the meantime, Kan Herb, Golden Flower, even Seven Forests, remain.

Some of my favorite Golden Flower formulas for lung health, in this current context, include:

	Sore Throat Focus	Cough Focus	Phlegm Focus	Detoxify/Immunity Focus
Coptis Relieve Toxicity Formula	X	X		X
Fritillaria & Pinellia Formula	X		X	
Lily Preserve Metal Formula	X	X		

	Sore Throat Focus	Cough Focus	Phlegm Focus	Detoxify/Immunity Focus
Rehmannia & Scrophularia Formula	X	X		X
Citrus & Pinellia Formula		X	X	X
Phlegm Transforming Formula		X	X	
Mulberry & Lycium Formula		X		X
Five Mushroom Formula		X		X
Ling Zhi Lung Formula		X		X

Coptis Relieve Toxicity Formula

Sore Throat Focus	X
Cough Focus	X
Phlegm Focus	
Detoxify/Immunity Focus	X

Fritillaria & Pinellia Formula

Sore Throat Focus	X
Cough Focus	
Phlegm Focus	X
Detoxify/Immunity Focus	

Lily Preserve Metal Formula

Sore Throat Focus	X
Cough Focus	X
Phlegm Focus	
Detoxify/Immunity Focus	

Rehmannia & Scrophularia Formula

Sore Throat Focus	X
Cough Focus	X
Phlegm Focus	
Detoxify/Immunity Focus	X

Citrus & Pinellia Formula

Sore Throat Focus	
Cough Focus	X
Phlegm Focus	X
Detoxify/Immunity Focus	X

Phlegm Transforming Formula

Sore Throat Focus	
Cough Focus	X
Phlegm Focus	X

Phlegm Transforming Formula
Detoxify/Immunity Focus

Mulberry & Lycium Formula

Sore Throat Focus	
Cough Focus	X
Phlegm Focus	
Detoxify/Immunity Focus	X

Five Mushroom Formula

Sore Throat Focus	
Cough Focus	X
Phlegm Focus	
Detoxify/Immunity Focus	X

Ling Zhi Lung Formula

Sore Throat Focus	
Cough Focus	X
Phlegm Focus	
Detoxify/Immunity Focus	X

If this drags on, it also probably wouldn't hurt to load up on the amino acid, rate-limiting component of glutathione synthesis, NAC. (The standard dose for most people seems to be 600 to 900 mg twice daily, for a month or two.) Or heck, once this is definitively over, consider a science-based 28-day whole body detox. (A 10- or 14-day option is offered by the companies that make these— Metagenics, Designs For Health, a few others, probably Xymogen and Ortho Molecular Products, Biotics Research, maybe even DaVinci Labs— but in today's world a 10-day detox is really just kind of a long, warm fart: feels good but doesn't really change much.)

And speaking of amino acids, alot of folks don't fully appreciate how crucial adequate protein intake (and its effective breakdown in stomach and SI (small intestine, not Staten Island)— so you also need to think of adequate HCl, brush border enzymes, and mindful eating/chewing)— is/are to the detoxification process. So too, adequate methylation. Not to slight robust bile flow.

If homeopathy is more your thing, you might check out Dr. Garber's "Lung Formula/LNG," Planetary Herbals' "Mullein Lung Complex" (also really more for phlegm though) and Progena's "Lung Plus" on our Fullscript site. I don't really know much about homeopathy though, even if I have seen it appear to work.

Mike Barr, a longtime Poz Contributing Editor and founding member of and scribe for the Treatment Action Group (TAG), is a functional medicine practitioner and herbalist in NYC. Reach out to him here. Feel free too to sign up for his carefully curated (and generously discounted) online supplement store.

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