

Efficacy of Traditional Chinese Medicine for the Management of Allergic Rhinitis

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Abstract: Allergic rhinitis (AR) is a common allergic disease that affects so many people around the world. The main symptoms include sneezing, runny nose, and nasal itching, which may affect our daily activities and quality of life. Even though conventional treatments can reduce symptoms; some patients are still facing these symptoms. Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) has been used for many years as another option for treating allergic rhinitis. This review focuses on the effectiveness of TCM methods, including acupuncture, Sanfu acupoint herbal patching, auricular acupuncture, and Chinese herbal medicine. Several studies reported that these treatments could help reduce nasal symptoms and improve the quality of life of patients with allergic rhinitis. In addition, TCM was reported to be safe with few side effects. However, more studies with larger groups of patients are needed to confirm their effectiveness. This review provides an overview of the current evidence on the use of TCM for allergic rhinitis.

Keywords: Allergic rhinitis, Traditional Chinese Medicine, Acupuncture, Chinese herbal medicine.

I. INTRODUCTION

Allergic rhinitis (AR) is a common disease that many people experience. It happens when the body reacts to allergens such as dust, pollen, or animal hair. People with allergic rhinitis may have symptoms like sneezing, runny nose, itchy nose, and blocked nose. These symptoms may seem minor, but they can affect daily activities, sleep, and quality of life. At present, allergic rhinitis is usually treated with medicines such as antihistamines and nasal sprays. These treatments can help control symptoms, but some patients still have repeated symptoms. Some people also look for other treatment options because they do not want to use medicines for a long time. [1]-[4]

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) has been used for a long time and is now becoming more interesting in allergic rhinitis treatment. TCM includes different methods such as acupuncture, herbal medicine, auricular acupuncture, and Sanfu acupoint herbal patching. These methods are believed to help reduce symptoms and support the body's natural balance.

Unlike conventional treatment, Traditional Chinese Medicine often combines different treatment approaches according to the patient's symptoms and overall condition. Acupuncture, herbal medicine, auricular acupuncture, and Sanfu acupoint herbal patching are among the most commonly used therapies for allergic rhinitis. In recent years, the number of clinical studies and systematic reviews investigating these treatments has increased. As a result, more evidence is now available to evaluate their effectiveness and safety in patients with allergic rhinitis. [5]-[9]

Many studies have investigated the effects of TCM on allergic rhinitis. Some studies reported that TCM could help reduce nasal symptoms and improve patients' quality of life. However, the results of each study are different because the treatment methods and research designs are not the same. Therefore, this review aims to collect and discuss current information about the effectiveness of Traditional Chinese Medicine for managing allergic rhinitis. [5]-[9]

II. OVERVIEW OF ALLERGIC RHINITIS

A. Definition and Causes of Allergic Rhinitis

Allergic rhinitis (AR) is a problem that happens in the nose. Many people have this disease. It happens when the body reacts to some things around us, such as dust, pollen, mold, and animal hair. These things are not dangerous for most people, but some people's bodies react to them and cause allergy symptoms. When people with allergic rhinitis meet these allergens,

their nose can become irritated. This can make the inside of the nose swollen and cause discomfort. Allergic rhinitis can happen in some seasons, for example when there is a lot of pollen in the air. It can also happen all year because of allergens that are always around us, such as house dust mites. [1]-[3]

There are many factors related to allergic rhinitis. Family history is one of them. People who have family members with allergies may have a higher chance of having allergic rhinitis. The environment is also important. Dust, air pollution, and smoke can make symptoms worse in some people. Allergic rhinitis can happen in both children and adults. The number of people with this disease is high in many countries. However, the number of patients is different in each area because people live in different environments and have different lifestyles. [2]-[4]

B. Symptoms and Impact on Quality of Life

People with allergic rhinitis usually have problems with their nose and eyes. The common symptoms include sneezing, a runny nose, an itchy nose, and a blocked nose. Some people may also have itchy eyes, red eyes, or watery eyes. These symptoms can happen after contact with allergens and may continue for a long time if the person is still exposed to the trigger. [1], [2]

The symptoms of allergic rhinitis can be different for each person. Some people may have mild symptoms, while others may have symptoms that affect their daily activities. A blocked nose is one of the symptoms that can cause problems because it can make breathing through the nose more difficult. Some patients may also have problems with sleep because they feel uncomfortable at night or wake up because of nasal symptoms. [2], [3]

Although allergic rhinitis is not a dangerous disease, it can affect the quality of life. People with frequent symptoms may have difficulty focusing on studying or working. Lack of good sleep can also make them feel tired during the day. In children, allergic rhinitis may affect learning performance because they may feel sleepy or have trouble concentrating in class. Allergic rhinitis can also be related to other allergic diseases, especially asthma. People with allergic rhinitis may have a higher chance of developing asthma or having worse asthma symptoms. [2]-[4]

C. Epidemiology and Prevalence of Allergic Rhinitis

The number of people with allergic rhinitis is not the same in every country. Some countries have more patients than others because people have different environments, weather, lifestyles, and exposure to allergens. Many studies have reported that allergic rhinitis affects a large number of people worldwide. The prevalence of this disease in adults is different between countries, with some areas showing a higher number of cases. This difference may be related to the different ways of diagnosis and the conditions of each area. [2], [3]

In recent years, allergic rhinitis has become more common in many places. Changes in the environment, air pollution, and increased contact with allergens may be some reasons that make more people experience this disease. People who live in cities may have more exposure to dust and pollution, which can trigger allergic symptoms. Although allergic rhinitis is not usually a serious disease, many patients have symptoms for a long time. The repeated symptoms can affect daily life and may require continuous treatment. Because allergic rhinitis affects many people, finding ways to control is still important. [2], [4]

D. Current Treatment and Limitations of Allergic Rhinitis

Most people with allergic rhinitis use medicines to control their symptoms. The common treatments are antihistamines and nasal sprays. These treatments can help with symptoms like sneezing, runny nose, and nasal congestion. However, allergic rhinitis is a disease that can happen again when patients meet allergens. Some people need to use medicines many times because the symptoms return after treatment. The results of treatment are also different for each person. Some patients are not fully satisfied with current treatments. They may still have problems with their symptoms or may not want to depend on medicines for a long time. This makes some patients look for other ways to take care of their condition. Therefore, Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) has received more attention for allergic rhinitis. [2], [4], [5]-[9]

III. TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE APPROACHES FOR ALLERGIC RHINITIS

A. Acupuncture

Acupuncture is a very famous part of Traditional Chinese Medicine. People have used it for a long time to help with health issues, including allergies that cause a runny or stuffy nose. During a session, a practitioner puts very thin needles into special spots on the body. These spots change depending on the person, because everyone feels their symptoms differently. [6]

Lots of researchers have tested how well acupuncture works for allergies. Most of these tests looked at things like sneezing, itchy noses, and congestion. Some people felt much better after their treatment and noticed their symptoms didn't return as fast. But the results weren't the same for everyone. One reason it's hard to get a straight answer is that every study was done differently. Some scientists used different needle spots, while others did more or fewer sessions. Also, some studies had a lot of people in them, while others were very small. This makes it tough to compare them all. [7], [8]

Even though the results vary, acupuncture is still one of the most-tested Chinese medicine treatments for allergies. To fully understand how well it works, we still need more big studies that all use the same methods. [6]-[8]

B. Sanfu Acupoint Herbal Patching (SAHP)

Sanfu acupoint herbal patching (SAHP) is a treatment used in Traditional Chinese Medicine for allergic rhinitis. It does not use needles. A herbal paste is placed on selected acupoints and kept on the skin for a few hours. The treatment is usually given during the Sanfu days, which are the hottest days of summer in the traditional Chinese calendar. The herbs in the patch are absorbed through the skin while the patch stays on the acupoints. Different hospitals and clinics may use different herbal formulas, but the treatment method is similar. The main purpose is to help reduce allergic rhinitis symptoms and make the symptoms happen less often. [5], [6]

Recent studies showed that many patients had less sneezing, less nasal congestion, and less runny nose after SAHP treatment. Some patients also reported that their daily life became easier because their symptoms were not as severe as before. In several studies, SAHP was compared with routine treatment, and better symptom improvement was reported in the SAHP groups. Some studies also used SAHP together with other treatments and found that patients improved more than those who received only one treatment. [5]

Some studies also evaluated symptom scores before and after treatment and found greater improvement in patients who received SAHP than in those who received conventional treatment alone. In addition, several studies reported that patients tolerated the treatment well, and only mild skin reactions such as temporary redness or itching were observed in a small number of cases. These findings suggest that SAHP may be a practical complementary treatment for patients with allergic rhinitis. [5]

C. Auricular Acupuncture

Auricular acupuncture is a type of Traditional Chinese Medicine that uses points on the ear. The ear is believed to be connected with different parts of the body, so stimulating these points may help relieve health problems. Treatment can be done with small needles or ear seeds. When ear seeds are used, patients can gently press them during the day. [6], [7]

For allergic rhinitis, auricular acupuncture is used to help with symptoms such as sneezing, a runny nose, a blocked nose, and an itchy nose. Some patients receive this treatment by itself, while others receive it together with other TCM treatments. The treatment plan is not always the same because it depends on the patient's symptoms. [7]

Several studies have reported that patients felt better after treatment. Nasal symptoms became milder in many cases, and some patients also said they could sleep better because their nose was less blocked at night. A few studies also found that symptom scores became lower after treatment. Even so, the results were not exactly the same in every study. Different treatment schedules, different ear points, and different follow-up periods may explain why the findings were not identical. [7]

Another advantage of auricular acupuncture is that it can be combined with other TCM treatments without greatly changing the treatment plan. Some studies included auricular acupuncture together with body acupuncture or herbal medicine and reported additional symptom improvement. However, because treatment protocols varied among studies, direct comparison of the results remains difficult. [7]

D. Chinese Herbal Medicine

Chinese herbal medicine has been used for allergic rhinitis for a long time. There are many kinds of herbs, so doctors do not always give the same formula to every patient. The prescription is usually changed depending on the symptoms. Some patients have more sneezing, while others have a blocked nose or a runny nose, so the herbs may be different. [6]

The medicine can be prepared in several forms. Some people drink boiled herbs, and some use granules or capsules because they are easier to take. In many hospitals, herbal medicine is not the only treatment. It is often given together with acupuncture or other TCM treatments. [6]

From recent studies, many patients had better nasal symptoms after taking Chinese herbal medicine. Sneezing happened less often, the nose was less blocked, and some patients said they could breathe more comfortably. A few studies also reported that the symptoms did not come back as often during the follow-up period. Even so, not every study reported the same result. One reason is that every study used a different herbal formula. Some patients received treatment for only a few weeks, while others continued for a longer time. The number of patients was also different, so it is hard to compare all studies directly. More research is still needed, especially studies that use similar herbal formulas and treatment periods. [6], [9]

IV. EFFECTIVENESS OF TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE FOR ALLERGIC RHINITIS

After using TCM treatment, many studies reported that patients with allergic rhinitis had fewer symptoms. The symptoms that were often measured were sneezing, runny nose, blocked nose, and itchy nose. Some patients also had better sleep and felt that their daily activities were less affected by allergy symptoms. The results of each treatment were not the same. Some studies showed that acupuncture could help reduce nasal symptoms. Some studies on herbal medicine and Sanfu acupoint herbal patching also found improvement after treatment. However, the results depended on the treatment method, the herbs used, and how long the patients received treatment. [5]-[9]

In some studies, TCM was compared with regular medicine or no treatment. The results showed that TCM could help some patients, especially when used together with other treatments. [5]-[9]

The effectiveness of TCM was evaluated using several outcome measures in different studies. Most studies assessed changes in nasal symptoms, including sneezing, nasal congestion, runny nose, and nasal itching, while some studies also evaluated patients' quality of life and sleep quality. Overall, improvements were reported in many patients after treatment, although the degree of improvement varied among studies.

Another important finding was that different TCM therapies appeared to provide benefits through different treatment approaches. Acupuncture mainly focused on stimulating specific acupoints, whereas SAHP combined herbal medicine with acupoint stimulation. Auricular acupuncture targeted specific points on the ear, while Chinese herbal medicine aimed to improve symptoms using individualized herbal formulas. Although these treatments differed in their methods, many studies reported positive clinical outcomes following treatment. [5]-[9]

V. POSSIBLE MECHANISMS OF TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE IN ALLERGIC RHINITIS

Allergic rhinitis is related to the immune system. When the body meets allergens, the immune system reacts and causes inflammation in the nose. This inflammation makes patients have symptoms like sneezing, runny nose, and nasal congestion. Many studies tried to explain how TCM may help allergic rhinitis. The main idea is that TCM may help reduce inflammation and control the immune response. In allergic rhinitis, some substances in the body are increased and cause allergy symptoms. TCM may affect these substances and reduce the allergic reaction. [6], [9]

For acupuncture, inserting needles into specific points may send signals to the nervous system. This may affect inflammation and the way the body responds to allergens. Some studies also found changes in immune-related factors after acupuncture treatment. Chinese herbal medicine contains many natural compounds. Some compounds may have anti-inflammatory effects and may help control allergy-related reactions. The effect depends on the type of herbs used because each herbal formula contains different ingredients. For SAHP, the effect may come from both the herbal medicine and the acupoints. The herbal paste is placed on the skin at specific points, and the ingredients may affect the body. Some studies reported changes in immune responses after SAHP treatment. [6]-[8]

Although the exact biological mechanisms have not been fully clarified, current evidence suggests that different TCM therapies may act through multiple pathways rather than a single mechanism. The therapeutic effects are believed to involve both regulation of immune responses and reduction of inflammatory processes. Because each TCM approach uses different treatment methods, the underlying mechanisms may also differ among acupuncture, SAHP, auricular acupuncture, and Chinese herbal medicine. [6]-[9]

VI. CONCLUSION

Allergic rhinitis is a disease that many people experience. Although current treatments can help control symptoms, some patients still have symptoms again after treatment. This makes TCM become another treatment option that has been studied in recent years. From the studies in this review, acupuncture, SAHP, auricular acupuncture, and Chinese herbal medicine

showed the ability to reduce some symptoms of allergic rhinitis. Many patients had improvement in sneezing, runny nose, and nasal congestion after treatment. Some studies also showed that patients felt better in their daily life. Therefore, TCM may be useful for helping patients with allergic rhinitis.

On the other hand, the results from each study were not the same. This may be because the treatment methods were different, such as different acupuncture points, herbal formulas, treatment periods, and number of patients. Some studies also did not follow patients for a long time.

Ongoing research is essential for improving quality of life and developing further medical treatments. Based on the current evidence, TCM may be considered as a complementary treatment for allergic rhinitis, especially for patients who continue to experience symptoms despite conventional treatment. Future studies with larger sample sizes, standardized treatment protocols, and longer follow-up periods will help provide stronger evidence regarding its clinical effectiveness and safety. [5]-[9]

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