

# ACUPUNK

## Field Notes of a Contemporary Alchemist

by Kaz Wegmuller, L.Ac.

### Fighting Colds and Flu Naturally

There's no doubt about it: autumn is here, and along with it the cold and flu season. If you are like most people, you know what it's like to suffer from sore throat, stuffy nose, headaches, body ache, cough, tiredness, and all the other unpleasant symptoms of the common cold and its heavy-hitting cousin the flu. And if you are like most people, you would like to avoid these symptoms as much as possible. Fortunately, there's a lot you can do to stave off or treat these viral infections.

First of all, if you are still healthy, the important thing is to stay healthy. Eat well, drink lots of water, get moderate exercise, sleep a lot. Wear enough clothes. According to the common-sense health wisdom of traditional Chinese medicine, fall and winter are the time to conserve your energy, to rest until the *qi* is ready to burst forth again in springtime. By going against this natural cycle of activity and inactivity (by partying hard, for instance, and not sleeping enough), your immunity is compromised and you may catch colds easily. A helpful habit to cultivate is to wash your hands a lot – most colds start with tiny virus-containing droplets that get spread through person-to-person contact.

To boost your immune system in the cooler months, cook with fresh vegetables and tubers that are ripe at this time of year. You may want to incorporate in your cooking immune-stimulating mushrooms like shiitake and *qi*-tonic herbs like astragalus and wild yam. A hearty soup is an excellent way to get their healthful properties into your system. You can also increase your daily dosage of vitamin C and zinc, nutrients that have been shown to increase resistance to all kinds of viruses.

If you are already sick, or catch a cold despite your well-intentioned health regimen, there is still a lot you can do to get better quickly. First of all, stop taking the *qi*-tonifying herbs

mentioned above. There is a common misconception that herbs like astragalus and ginseng should be taken during a cold, because of their immune-stimulating effects. The truth is quite the opposite. There is a saying in Chinese that you should not “trap the robber.” If you imagine that the human body is a house, the cold bug is like a robber who has broken in. Tonic herbs “close the windows and doors,” which is a good thing if you are healthy, since you want to keep robbers out, but when the robber is already in the house, the last thing you want to do is trap him there! Therefore, you have to shift your herbal strategy away from tonification to methods that are more appropriate for the treatment of a viral infection.

During the first couple days of a cold or flu, the pathogen has not yet penetrated deeply, and can be vented out with herbs. Through a combination of diaphoretic (sweat-inducing) herbs like fresh ginger or the Chinese herb *jing jie* (*schizonepeta tenuifolia*) and “antibiotic” herbs like echinacea and honeysuckle, it is possible to get rid of some colds if you catch them early enough. One commercially available product that does this is the formula known as *Yin Qiao San* (sometimes spelled *Yin Chiao San*). Another is *Gan Mao Ling*. Both are available at most health food and herb stores. It is important to take these formulas for two or three days past the time you start feeling better, as the pathogen may lurk in your body and spring back into action if you stop taking the herbs too soon. In addition to taking herbs, it is helpful to continue supplementing with vitamin C and zinc. An excellent product that combines the benefits of Chinese herbs with vitamin C, zinc, and other anti-viral nutraceuticals is *Airborne*, which is also available at natural food stores. One more helpful thing you can do is to flush out your nasal and sinus cavities with warm water and a little salt, by pouring the liquid through your nose out of a pop-top water bottle

or Indian *neti* pot. The best way to do this is to bend over a sink, turn your head so that one nostril points up, then pour the warm salt water into that nostril until it pours out the other. Follow this up with a good nose-blowing session. You may be surprised at what comes out, and how much! This practice is especially helpful if you are suffering from nasal congestion and sinus headache.

If you find yourself sicker than a dog in spite of your vigilant efforts to keep the cold at bay, it may be that you just need to roll with the punches and let the virus take its course. Sometimes, our bodies need a rest, and if we don't give them one they'll find or create some

excuse (usually a cold or an injury) to make sure they get a break. Take a couple days off, stay in bed, take hot baths, drink lots of water and hot soup – it's probably what you need to do. If your symptoms are unbearable (intense headaches, body ache, vomiting, diarrhea, etc.), and you are lucky enough to know an herbalist/acupuncturist who makes house calls, or if you are able to hobble over to their clinic, a few needles and a custom-designed herb formula will get you through the worst of it. Finally, if you're really worried that you have something much worse than the average cold, don't hesitate to call the doctor.

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