

Treating Allergies with Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine

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Introduction

In October I attended a lecture at the AAAOM Conference entitled “Acupuncture in the treatment of Allergies: Clinical Experiences and Needling Techniques” given by Rong-Sheng Lin. The lecture had its good and bad points, but was interesting and worthwhile. The worst part of the talk was that the translation was difficult, and much of the lecture was too hard to understand. Another difficulty I had with the lecture was that much of the efficacy of his treatments may depend on his needling technique, which he demonstrated at the end of the lecture. His techniques were much stronger than I use, and when I tried them on my American-born patients I got a lot of complaints and had to revert to my gentler (but still effective) methods. Also, some of his needling techniques seemed dangerous to me, such as perpendicular needling over points that were half way between the hwato points and the back shu points, and then bending the needle so that it would then go in at more of an angle. I would be hesitant to use these techniques without more thorough training than a short demonstration. So I just use the regular back shu points and technique of oblique insertion.

But Rong-Sheng Lin is very experienced, and has done extensive research into studies about acupuncture and the immune system. I have used much of his theory in treating my allergy patients with good results.

Acupuncture’s Affects on the Regulation of the Immune System

The Immune System and Disease

There are four types of Immune Diseases. Each of them involves the actions and interactions of the lymphocytes in the body. There are two kinds of lymphocytes—B-cells (so-called because they are created in the Bone Marrow) and T-cells (so-called because they are matured in the Thymus). In allergic reactions, B-cells produce immunoglobulin, including the antibody IgE which, when elevated, causes many of the symptoms of allergic rhinitis and hay fever. T-cells, on the other hand, attack body cells that have been taken over by viruses or are cancerous.

The four types of Immune Diseases are:

- Type I: Hypersensitive reaction or Allergy
- Type II: Auto-Immune Disease where the antigen is an auto-antigen
- Type III: Auto-Immune Disease where the antigen is exogenous

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- Type IV: Delayed T-Cell abnormal reaction

We will only be considering Type I Immune Disease in this article.

Mechanism of Hypersensitive Allergic Reaction

Allergies are caused by an over-sensitive immune response. The immune system normally protects the body against harmful substances such as bacteria and viruses. Allergy symptoms occur when the immune system reacts to substances (allergens) that are generally harmless and in most people do not cause an immune response.

In Hypersensitive Allergic Reaction, allergens stimulate the B-lymphocytes to overproduce IgE. The IgE in turn stimulates cells such as mast cells to release histamine into the blood and tissues in a process called degranulation,. This release of histamine and other substances causes pathological changes in the organs and tissues of the body. These changes include:

- Dilatation of Capillaries, which can affect the skin, causing eczema, urticaria, and atopic dermatitis; or nasal membranes, resulting in allergic rhinitis and hay fever.
- Contraction of Smooth Muscles, which can affect the bronchial membrane, bringing on an asthma attack.
- Increased gland secretion, involving the gastro-intestinal membrane, bringing on allergic gastroenteritis.

Studies of Acupuncture's Affects on the Hypersensitive Allergic Reaction

Studies have concluded that acupuncture has direct benefits for treating allergies.

- Acupuncture reduces IgE levels
In one study patients with allergic rhinitis were treated with acupuncture. IgE levels were tested before treatment, immediately after treatment, and then again two months after the treatment. IgE levels dropped 61% immediately after the treatment and 76% two months later. Those whose IgE levels dropped greater than 50% remained symptom free for 6 months. The length of the course of treatment was not specified.
 - Points used included LI-4, LI-11, LI-20, ST-36, BL-12, and GB-30.
- Acupuncture reduces blood levels of histamine better than oral anti-histamines
In another study of allergic rhinitis patients, about half of the patients received acupuncture and the other half received oral anti-histamine treatment. The blood histamine level was tested before treatment, right after treatment, and again three months after treatment. The histamine levels decreased gradually and the symptoms improved significantly in the acupuncture group compared to the oral anti-histamine group. Again, the length of the course of treatment was not specified.
 - Points used included Ding Chuan, LI-4, LU-7, and LI-20.

- Acupuncture has an adaptogenic effect on the functions of the body. An adaptogen has a normalizing influence on physiology, irrespective of the direction of change from physiological norms caused by a stressor. In one study, acupuncture was shown to be able to increase reduced levels of LTR (lymphocyte transformation rate. A low rate shows that lymphocytes are not transforming into immunoblasts as needed.) and to decrease IgE levels, thus reducing allergic symptoms. This shows that acupuncture can bring balance and homeostasis to the body and the immune system, by reducing or elevating levels as needed.
- Acupuncture has a regulatory effect on hormonal function. Acupuncture has been shown in various studies to regulate the endocrine system. These hormonal factors in turn have a regulatory effect on the immune system. In one study, cortisol levels in patients with rheumatic heart disease reached more balanced levels with acupuncture. In those with cortisol levels that were deemed too high, the acupuncture lowered their levels. On the other hand, those with low levels of cortisol experienced an increase in levels after acupuncture treatment. This shows that acupuncture has an adaptogenic effect on the pituitary-adrenal system.
 - The only point mentioned in this study was PC-6.
- Stimulation of the Central Nervous System
A new concept, “the meridian-neuro-endocrino-immune network”, was introduced in 2002. This means that the nervous system plays an important role for acupuncture in regulating the immune system. We can stimulate the central nervous system through the Qi sensation on the ganglionic fibers via the back shu points. This causes the CNS to release neurotransmitters which work through the neuro-immuno-endocrine network to control and stabilize the immune functions of the organs of the body.

Commonly Used Points for Treating Allergies

During this section, Rong-Sheng elaborated on his needling technique. I will not try to repeat those techniques here, but will give the points that he used.

- Eczema and Urticaria—Main points used were PC-7, SJ-4, LI-11, GB-31, SP-10
- Allergic Rhinitis—UB-10, UB-65, LI-20, Yin Tang, GV-23 through GV-24, UB-67.
- Asthma—LU-10, LI-4, LU-6 through to LU-5

Treating allergies with Special Back Shu Points

Rong-sheng used perpendicular needling on special points halfway between the hwato points and the back shu points. I prefer to use oblique needling.

- The five most common back points for treating allergies are Ding Chuan, GV-14, BL-12, BL-13, UB-10,

Treatment of Allergic Rhinitis Based on Pattern Analysis

- Lung Qi Deficiency
 - Main symptoms include fever with aversion to cold, no sweating clear nasal drainage
 - Use Minor Blue Green Dragon Decoction, Xiao Qing Long Tang
 - GV-14, LU-9, SP-3, K-7 for excess cold, PC-5 for excess heat.
 - Main symptoms include fatigue, recurrence when temperature changes, aversion to wind, stuffy nose
 - Use Jade Windscreen Powder, Yu Ping Feng San
 - BL-12, CV-6, ST-36
 - Main symptoms include incurable stuffy nose, sticky nasal discharge with fowl odor, headache at the forehead
 - Use Cang Er Zi
 - BL-13, LI-20, GV-23, LI-11
- Spleen Qi Deficiency
 - Main symptoms are non-stop clear nasal drainage, easily tired and fatigue, spontaneous sweating
 - Use Sheng Ling Bai Zhu San
 - ST-34, SP-3, BL-20, Yin Tang, LI-4, LI-2
- Kidney Yang Deficiency of Asthma
 - Main symptoms are coldness in body and extremities, long years of itchy nose with clear nasal discharge and sneezing, cough with sputum chest suffocation
 - Use Jin Gui Shen Qi Wan
 - Ding Chuan, BL-17, BL-23, BL-20, CV-12, CV-4

Conclusion

My love of Oriental Medicine is steadfast, and writing this paper makes it even more clear to me that our medicine is meaningful and solid and true. Acupuncture does balance the body's Yin and Yang, and thereby regulates the immune function on many levels. "Balance the Yin and Yang, and then health is achieved." "Whether deficiency or excess of Qi and blood, which causes disease of all types, in order to regulate, balance is the key." These statements tell so simply how acupuncture and oriental medicine bring about health in our patients. All of the scientific studies mentioned in this paper all lead to the same result: bringing the body back into harmony to eliminate illness and achieve good health.

