

ARRC PR Fact Sheet 1

ALLERGIES AND ACUPUNCTURE

What happens in allergic conditions?

An abnormal or inadequately regulated response to an allergen involving components of the immune system (especially certain T cell lymphocytes) stimulates the growth of mast cells and other aspects of the humoral immunity. There are high levels of IgE antibodies that react strongly with the allergen on subsequent exposure – causing the cells to release substances such as histamines and prostaglandins. These irritate and inflame the tissues to cause the particular symptoms: hence with rhinitis the site is the nasal mucosa and typical symptoms are sneezing and congestion.

Effectiveness of acupuncture

a) Allergic asthma

See the ARRC Briefing Paper on Asthma. One of the RCTs (Joos et al – Germany) looked specifically at allergic asthma and measured many components of the immune system (this aspect discussed below). The ‘real’ acupuncture group was significantly better than the control (inappropriate acupuncture) group in measures of wellbeing

b) Allergic rhinitis

- Austrian RCT, true v sham acupuncture. No preventive effect re induced rhinitis during the course of the experiment (9 treatments) but acupuncture led to a reduction in subjective complaints in the two month follow-up period
- Chinese comparative trial. Acupuncture group had a ‘remarkable’ response – better than that of a desensitization group. This actually covered rhinitis, asthma and urticaria
- Italian outcome study with children. Treatment by seed on plaster pressing on ear points. Used in Spring for hayfever or in Winter for dust mite rhinitis. Immediately effective, easy to use and well accepted.
- There are many other articles, especially Chinese ones, presenting positive results for allergic rhinitis with acupuncture
- The Chinese often treat allergic conditions now by injecting acu-points with extracts of the appropriate allergen. This is apparently highly effective

How does acupuncture work?

a) Physiological research

- It has been found to have the ability to affect all parts of the immune system, including those involved in allergic reactions (and as discussed above allergies are driven by disharmony in the immune system).

- Some points are more effective than others in this respect.
- (Electro-) acupuncture was effective in treating induced allergic shock in mice – and this action was not mediated by endorphins – hence a different mechanism from the much discussed one for analgesia.
- In the German asthma RCT: the true acupuncture group showed significant changes in the concentrations of cytokines, eosinophils and some types of lymphocytes; also the lymphocyte proliferation rate: all components of the allergic reaction. In the control group there were virtually no such effects. Conclusion: traditional acupuncture can modulate the immune system.
- A Chinese study on allergic asthma: acupuncture caused a significant drop in the concentrations of IgA in saliva and nasal secretion and IgE in sera, suggesting it could inhibit attacks of both delayed and immediate allergic asthma
- Acupuncture points will also have local effects, e.g. points by the side of the nose are often used for rhinitis, and they have direct effects on sneezing and inflammation. Whether this involves some of the same immune system actions mentioned above, or whether they only happen via the central nervous system I do not know.

b) Traditional Chinese medicine understanding

The root. In the light of modern knowledge about allergies and the immune system there has been some re-defining of the patterns of imbalance underlying conditions such as allergic asthma and rhinitis. Perhaps the foremost TCM commentator in the UK, Giovanni Maciocia, has proposed that the root problem is an inborn weakness in the Lung and Kidney Defensive Qi (energy) – resulting in a compromised immune system. The weakness is believed to be inherited or caused by trauma in utero or childbirth. [But this hypothesis is not universally supported].

The manifestation. For rhinitis and asthma the pathogenic factor is ‘wind’, allowed to invade and lodge in the body by the weakened Defensive Qi. ‘Wind’ equates here to allergens carried by the air – dust, pollen, dander etc. Acupuncture works well to ease attacks and reduce symptoms in these conditions because wind is insubstantial and hence relatively easy to clear (cf phlegm, for example). Nevertheless, as the underlying imbalance arose so early in life (or before) it may take many treatments to clear that susceptibility.

Other pathogenic factors may feature in other allergies, for example allergic skin conditions certainly may involve wind invasion but probably other factors too.

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