



TCM & Food Allergies

Traditional Chinese Medicine is used to treat a whole host of ailments ranging from headaches to insomnia, what can it do about allergies?

by Doris Rathgeber

When you or someone in your family has food allergies or intolerances, it can be a burden and socially limiting. Because so many gatherings involve food, sufferers might feel they can't attend events in case they have an allergic reaction, or they may feel awkward asking about each ingredient used in dishes. They may also feel embarrassed to be the only ones to not eat a certain dish or meal.

Food allergies are a serious issue. It's hard to determine why, but the number of food allergies reported has been increasing every year. For patients and doctors it's a challenge to identify the

allergy and its root causes. Many people may not even know their discomfort is rooted in an allergic reaction to specific kinds of foods because the symptoms can be extremely diverse.

Symptoms range from headaches, difficulty in concentration, dermatology problems such as eczema, gastrointestinal disorders (abdominal pain, diarrhea, nausea, vomiting) to respiratory disorders (cough, asthma, nasal congestion) and swellings of lips, eyes, face, tongue and throat. More serious symptoms such as breathing problems, cardiovascular collapse, anxiety attacks and mental confusion can also occur. Allergic reactions can even be life threatening.

Identifying an Allergy

Allergic reactions often appear days to several weeks after exposure to the offending food, making it difficult to track the culprit. Allergies can be recognized with the help of blood tests that identify antibodies that arise from allergies, whereas common food intolerances cannot. However, both allergies and intolerances show similar symptoms.

The most common foods to which people develop allergies or intolerances are dairy products, shellfish, wheat, corn, sugar, nuts and certain fruits. The use of food additives such as dyes, preservatives, MSG and sulfites increase the number of

allergy sufferers even more. In China, the ingredients of some dishes are not easily identified and restaurant staff is generally not well informed about allergies.

To make matters worse, over time, many people develop more than one allergy or intolerance. This complicates the identification and elimination of the allergy-causing foods and in some instances may lead to malnutrition and underweight.

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According to Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), the underlying causes for an allergic reaction are disharmonies in the lung and spleen organ systems. Respiratory problems are mostly related to deficiencies in the lung system while gastrointestinal disorders and swellings are mostly related to the spleen system. The common intolerances to gluten, wheat, sugar, or lactose are usually traced back to a disharmony in the spleen system.

The majority of gastrointestinal diseases associated with food allergies can be

further divided into four disease patterns (according to main and accompanying symptoms):

-Dampness-heat: Main symptoms are abdominal pain, abdominal fullness and bloating, tendency to diarrhea, cramps, tiredness;

-Heat-dampness: Main symptoms are nausea, vomiting, lack of appetite, burping, diarrhea, stomach pain, headache and insomnia;

-Stagnation of liver Qi: Main symptoms are indigestion, a constricted feeling in the chest, bloated abdomen;

-Weak spleen Qi: Main symptoms are a constricted feeling in the stomach, diarrhea, chronic cough, weakness of body, heavy weight loss.

TCM recommends a three-step treatment to cure allergies and intolerances. First, the patient must eliminate all foods that trigger

allergic reactions. A balanced diet plan helps to guarantee a healthy and adequate nutrition during that time.

Second, the body is purged of the accumulated "bad" substances. Third, the body needs to rebuild its own capacity to respond normally again to the allergic triggering foods.

Step two and three are done with herbal medicine and acupuncture. TCM believes that cutting out food is necessary at the beginning of the treatment but in the long run the body needs to get used to the items again to reestablish a normal life for the patient.

A wide and diverse diet helps to lower the risk of developing allergies. Therefore, it's recommended to eat different foods for breakfast, lunch and dinner every day. ☺

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