

Treating Colds and Flu Using a Natural Approach

By Brian Dempsey, L.Ac.

Catching a cold or flu can be a miserable experience, with the typical fatigue, achiness, fever, sore throat, cough, and the sad potential of going through entire boxes of tissue. Many people typically have two to four colds during a given season, often times causing them to miss out on family and recreational events, or even school or work. Here in Northern California our cold, wet winters provide an environment conducive for acquiring the viruses that cause colds and flu. Once they have started, these viral infections of the upper respiratory tract are not responsive to antibiotics (which tend to be over-prescribed), nor do non-prescription cold medications shorten the course of the illness. Fortunately, some simple herbal preparations and the Traditional Chinese Medical system offer substantial relief from this winter nuisance, and alternatives to long periods of bed rest, misery and loss of productivity.

The Chinese Medical tradition has a rich and complex approach to cold and flu treatment, which, when augmented with a few other herbs and supplements, can often provide faster and more effective relief than conventional approaches. Below I will outline some very basic herbal approaches to treating colds from a Chinese perspective. Keep in mind that these are very simplified approaches and should only be applied for mild conditions.

The first sign of a cold or flu is often a sore throat. Everyone knows that familiar internal groan when they wake up with one. What should a person do under these circumstances? I often recommend Echinacea Purpurea, a Native American herb, for the first onset of a cold. If started early enough, this herb alone will often knock out a cold before it gets started. In fact studies indicate that Echinacea significantly boosts the immune system, helping the body's defenses against infections. There are many choices for Echinacea. I often recommend the Traditional Medicinal Echinacea or the liquid Zand brand. Try to avoid alcohol tinctures, as they are generally much weaker in strength. Probably the most important thing to know about taking Echinacea for early treatment of colds and flu is to take doses frequently in the beginning. I would recommend five to eight cups of tea per day, or about the same number of full droppers of tincture for the first day or two, then tapering down according to the intensity of the remaining symptoms.

For sinus conditions, there is no Chinese herb available other than through a Chinese pharmacy, so I often recommend Goldenseal along with Echinacea, which sometimes is effective in reducing symptoms. The same frequent dosing schedules for this herb apply, although with Goldenseal, I often recommend taking it in pill-form, as it is quite bitter to the taste. Acupuncture can also be helpful in opening and draining the sinuses.

For an achy flu with a low-grade fever, we Traditional Chinese Medicine practitioners often use a Patchouli Chinese herbal mixture. This is helpful in reducing the achiness and fever. Taking five to six cups of a Patchouli infusion per day is recommended.

For earaches, a good herbal substitute is Mullein herbal eardrops. This is a soothing approach to reducing mild to moderate ear infections and is worth trying for children or

adults who have frequent ear infections. Mullein eardrops made with a glycerin base have an advantage over oil in that glycerin draws water to it and is helpful in drawing fluid from the ear. It can be helpful to warm a dropper-full of the liquid Mullein herbal tincture in a spoon before placing the drops into the ear. By warming the herbs up it should improve the pain-relieving qualities. The usual recommendation is four to five drops in the affected ear(s) three to five times a day. It is helpful for the person to tilt the head slightly to allow the drops to reach the bottom of the canal. A cotton plug may be inserted, also, to keep the medicine in place.

For colds that have started in the presence of high stress, acupuncture and antioxidant therapy is recommended. While the most advantageous Chinese herbs such as Buplureum or Gentian are not typically available in most herbal cold formulations, one can use other natural antioxidant products such as Quercetin, Bromelain, or Vitamin C to assist in healing during a “stress cold.” Quercetin is a plant pigment in many foods—onions, apples, berries, tea, and red wine. It's not a nutrient, but is classified as a flavonoid. Once thought to be vitamins, flavonoids were given such names as vitamin P and vitamin C2. Common supplemental intake of Quercetin is 400 mg two to three times per day. Bromelain is an enzyme typically extracted from the stems of pineapple plants. Recommended dosages of Bromelain vary with the form used. Due to the wide variation, I suggest following label instructions. There are at least two scientific studies that validate Bromelain’s efficacy in sinus infections.

Taking extra Vitamin C may help to minimize the inflammation and swelling of mucous membranes lining the sinuses. Dosages vary according to many factors (including bowel tolerance), but I would say 500mg three to four times per day is safe. Vitamin B complex is also helpful in times of stress.

Dry coughs often respond to the Chinese Asparagus root and Ophiopogon Tuber. Again these Chinese herbs are not typically available at local stores, so I recommend the Traditional Medicinal Throat Coat. This contains the herb Mullein, which, along with being useful for ear infections (see above), is also quite soothing to the throat and helps to loosen a dry cough. Take this tea frequently for better results; up to eight times per day.

Keep in mind, if a cold or flu is not improving after a week to ten days, come to a Licensed Acupuncturist or other qualified health practitioner for a more comprehensive treatment. And at any time if you have high fevers, difficulty breathing, chest pain, loss of consciousness, or other serious symptoms, contact your physician, as colds and flu occasionally may progress to more serious conditions. But, for the uncomplicated common cold or flu, hopefully these simple natural approaches may prove effective for you and your family.

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