

Using Acupuncture to Treat Asthma

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Acupuncture for the Treatment of Asthma

Background of Asthma

According to the CDC (Center for Disease Control), nearly 6.7 million or 9.1 % of children were being treated for asthma in the United States in 2007. In that same year, 16.2 million or 7.3 % of adults were being treated for asthma. Among those, over 3,500 died. What if this disease was not only treatable, but treatable in a way that could lower or even eliminate the need for inhalers and drugs? These drugs and inhalers are not only costly and inconvenient, they have several serious health-risks and side-effects. The solution lies in acupuncture and Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM).

What is Asthma?

What exactly is Asthma? A simple explanation is that asthma is a partial and temporary obstruction of the airways in the lungs. This obstruction is due to inflammation of the airways, contraction or spasms of the muscles around the bronchi, and excessive mucous in the bronchi of the lungs. This combination leads to wheezing and shortness of breath (dyspnea) that is commonly referred to an "asthma-attack". These attacks can range from being annoying to life-threatening. What causes this? Asthma can be divided into two types: Atopic or allergic asthma and non-allergic asthma.

Atopic asthma, as the name implies, is due to a hypersensitivity to airborne particles or allergens. An immunoglobulin E (IgE) immune reaction occurs where mast cells that line the bronchi surface release a series of enzymes including serotonin, histamine, bradykinin, and prostaglandins. These substances trigger early-stage bronco-spasms in the lungs. After this initial phase, other chemicals including eosinophils and leukotrienes are released that lead to both inflammation of the bronchial lining and the release of mucous. This triple threat of spasms, inflammation, and mucous causes the feeling of suffocation that is so common with severe asthma

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attacks. To put it simply, asthma sufferers exhibit an immune response that is not self-limiting and is disproportionate to the airborne irritant.

Why do some people suffer with this allergic reaction while others do not? More importantly, why are the reported cases of allergic asthma on the rise? For reasons not fully understood, healthy individuals exhibit a series of self-limiting factors that prevent excessive immune response that asthmatics lack. One of the possible explanations is due to the Hygiene Theory⁽¹⁾. This theory suggests that atopic asthma is due to a lack of infections in infancy and the overuse of antibiotics and immunizations. Other theories suggest that IgG (immunoglobulin G) antibodies, which are known to help control IgE based allergic reactions, are lacking in infants pre-disposed to allergic asthma. Since IgG antibodies are the only immunoglobulins that can cross from the mother to the fetus, it's thought that premature separation of the umbilical cord during child-birth can lead to an IgG deficiency in newborns, and consequently a higher chance of IgE mediated allergic reactions.

Regardless of the initial cause, atopic asthma is usually first seen in early childhood and is most often triggered by allergens including animal dander, pollen, and waste products of dust mites. The allergic response will reach its full reaction within 20 minutes of exposure to the allergens.

Non-allergic asthma, in contrast, is not triggered by allergens. Instead, it may be brought on by exercise or infections and often occurs later in life. While it also may be triggered by airborne irritants and cause broncho-constriction and inflammation, they do not induce an unregulated immune response.

Drugs: The Dangerous Solution

The common protocol for asthma is through medication. These medications can be delivered either through an inhaler or in a pill form and include corticosteroids, beta2-agonists, and leukotriene modifiers. Standard treatment is a two-step process. First, you'll need to take a long-term drug that reduces inflammation and makes the bronchi less sensitive to airborne triggers. Secondly, you'll have to take quick-relief drugs for acute attacks in the form of fast-acting inhalers. These will be bronchodilators or short acting beta-agonists.

Like all Western drugs, asthma medications include a list of health-risks and side-effects. How serious are they? It depends largely who you ask. Doctors and asthma clinics who's treatment protocol involves drugs will emphasize that as long you follow the directions, health-risks are minimal and the benefits far outweigh the side-effects.

A very complete list of side-effects for these drugs can be found at www.rxlist.com. One of the most alarming effects of the beta2-agonists is, ironically, an increased number of asthma-related deaths! This side-effect is common enough that the FDA has required that these drugs include a "BLACK-BOX WARNING". This label is the most serious warning that drug companies can carry.

The other commonly listed side-effects of asthma medication include: Upper respiratory fungal infections (Thrush), headaches, dizziness, anxiety/nervousness, sinusitis, loss of appetite, liver dysfunction, skin rashes, and hypertension.

Prolonged use of the cortisone-based anti-inflammatory drugs include a host of systemic effects including impaired immune response and wound healing, adrenal suppression, truncal obesity, sleep and emotional disorders, nausea, osteoporosis, acne, gastrointestinal disorders, and growth suppression in children.

So the question is, would you use these drugs if you had an alternative? More importantly, would you feed these drugs to your children?

Traditional Chinese Medicine and Acupuncture: A Safer Alternative

A more effective and dramatically healthier solution can be found through acupuncture and Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM).

Ironically, the Chinese have no historical experience with early-onset allergic asthma. Even in modern times, the incidence of atopic asthma in China is almost non-existent. The closest equivalent is “breathlessness” or “wheezing”. The cause of these diseases were either invasion of some external pathogen, diet, emotions, or some combination of strenuous or excessive lifestyle. None of these can really be attributed to young children and explain the high incidence of child-hood allergic asthma. This again suggests that some aspect of the Western lifestyle is a major factor in the cause.

Modern Chinese medical theory suggests that atopic asthma is originally caused by the deficiency in Kidney and Lung Qi as well as internal Wind in the lungs . Specifically, it is in the deficiency of the defensive aspects of Kidney and Lung Qi.

Along with the classic filtering functions, the Kidneys are responsible for growth and development, sexual function, and overall vitality and health of the body. Kidney Qi is also largely influenced by the overall health of the parents, which explains the possible familial connection of atopic asthma. The Lungs are important not only in air-exchange, but also play a large role in the body’s resistance to external disease. The strength of the immune system is largely determined by the health of the Lungs. In combination, both the Lungs and Kidneys are vitally important in both the cause and the eventual treatment of atopic asthma. When an asthma attack occurs, we see this as an attack of internal “Wind”. In TCM, the term “internal Wind” suggests some kind of spasm or contraction; in this case referring to the broncho-spasms common in asthma attacks.

In treating asthma with acupuncture, our goal is to both strengthen the defensive aspects of the Lungs and Kidneys as well as dispelling internal Wind. While this may seem like a monumental task, it is actually very simple using acupuncture. Acupuncture has a very powerful “regulatory” effect on the body and has been found to lower excessive levels of IgE and eosinophils that are responsible for the hyper-activity of the

immune system during an asthma attack. Acupuncture is also very effective in controlling spasms (Wind) in the body whether they be in the form of tics, tremors, or even spasms. As a result, acupuncture can both address both the inflammatory as well as the broncho-spasm aspects of asthma.

Regardless of the type of asthma, acupuncture has proven incredibly effective in lowering the symptoms of even completely eliminating asthma in our patients. We get repeated updates from patients telling us they don't have to use their medication anymore; how they can leave their inhaler at home during their morning run, or that their son or daughter can now play with other kids without fearing an asthma attack. Why is this asthma solution not more common? With its overwhelming evidence and virtually zero side-effects, it is a wonder why more asthma clinics and physicians do not offer this option to their patients. As the population of asthma sufferers continues to rise, we will continue to be flooded with TV commercials for the latest asthma drugs. Instead of resigning yourself to a collection of medications, turn towards your local acupuncturist. Both your body and your pocketbook will be much healthier (and happier).

End Notes:

1. Maciocia Giovanni, The Practice of Chinese Medicine, 2nd Edition. Churchill Livingstone, Oxford 2008, pp 120-133