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Asthma & Its Treatment with Oriental Medicine

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Asthma Basics: Anyone who has had or is close to someone who has had an asthma attack knows the characteristic shortness of breath, wheezing, coughing and feeling of suffocation, as well as the nervousness, sense of helplessness, fear and even panic that ensues.

Asthma varies in severity, from mild wheezing and shortness of breath to life-threatening respiratory failure. In many cases, it requires constant awareness and management. Though the triggers vary from person to person, it has been determined that an inflammation of the airway leads to a contraction of the airway muscles, production of mucous and swelling of the airways. (1), (2)

Asthma, like allergies, is an immune system imbalance. Part of the immune system is overactive; while another part of the immune system is sluggish, leading to hypersensitivity, inflammation and broncho-constriction. (3)

Though it can arise at any age, half of all cases first occur in children under age 10, affecting twice as many boys as girls (2). It is the cause of over 10 million school days missed per year, and it is the number one reason that children are hospitalized.

Asthma is on the Rise: According to the Asthma and Allergy foundation of America, as of 2001, an estimated 17 million Americans suffer from asthma. 5 million are under age 18 (1 in every 20 children). Everyday, 14 Americans die from asthma. (4) And, the Center for Disease Control expects that the number of Americans with asthma will rise to 30 million by the year 2020. (5) Here in Tampa Bay, over 100,000 people have been diagnosed with this disease.

Not only is asthma on the rise, but our current medical technology is not able to keep up with it. I have met a number of very scared parents, whose children are on 7 to 10 medications every day, and making 2 to 4 visits to the E.R. each month.

Triggers of Asthma: Asthma can be extrinsic, that is, it is triggered by sensitivity to specific external allergens. Common extrinsic allergens include pollen, mold, animal dander, dust mites; and irritants, such as cigarette smoke, household cleaners, room fresheners, candles, incense, paint, varnish, talcum powder, chalk dust and other air pollutants; as well as food additives including sulfites. Extrinsic asthma is often accompanied by other allergic symptoms such as eczema and/or sinus allergies.

Asthma can also be classified as intrinsic. Here, the specific allergen triggers cannot be identified. Most cases are preceded by a severe respiratory infection, and may be aggravated by lung irritants, emotional stress, fatigue, exposure to noxious fumes, hormonal changes, temperature and humidity changes. Many asthmatics have both intrinsic and extrinsic asthma symptoms. Other triggers include infection, sensitivity to medication, exercise, and reflux. (1), (2), (6).

Causes of Asthma: Why do some people have asthma, and others do not? This is the subject of many studies, most of which have barely begun to scratch the surface. Here is a small sampling of some findings so far:

A study published in the Journal of Manipulative & Physiological Therapeutics, which involves statistics of 13,944 children over an 8-year period, has led the Institute of Medicine to conclude that children who receive tetanus or diphtheria-tetanus-pertussis (DTP) vaccines are 100% more likely to have asthma, 50% more likely to experience severe allergy-related symptoms, and 80% more likely to have sinusitis. (7).

Also, a study published in the American Journal of Respiratory and Critical Care Medicine concludes that children who are exposed to cigarette smoke at an early age experience a decline in lung function, and a 50% greater chance of being diagnosed with asthma by age 6, than children who grow up in non-smoking families. (8)

Yet another study shows that asthma is a potential side effect of artificial Hormone Replacement Therapy. (9)

Common Treatments: Most asthma is managed by pharmaceutical medications, which do a beautiful job of life-saving, acute care. Given an emergency situation, pharmaceuticals are often the best option. But, pharmaceutical medications do nothing to address the underlying cause of why someone has the disease. Nor do they promote overall health and wellbeing, or decrease the need for more pharmaceutical medication. In fact, the long term use of asthma medications may actually be detrimental:

Here is a review of some of some common asthma medications and their side effects:

Bronchodilators are used to relieve coughing, wheezing, shortness of breath and difficulty breathing; their general side effects include nausea, vomiting, headaches, nervousness, restlessness, and insomnia, especially among children and the elderly.

Corticosteroids are used to decrease inflammation in the airways. They also reduce a person's ability to cope with and recover from trauma, surgery and infection. Other side effects include hoarseness, dry mouth, suppressed growth in children, coughing, increased appetite, fluid retention, weight gain, mood swings, increased cholesterol, osteoporosis, thinning of the skin, diabetes, cataracts, and muscle weakness.

Antihistamines are used to relieve allergy attacks, which can contribute to asthma. They cause drowsiness, dry mouth, constipation, confusion, nightmares, nervousness, restlessness and irritability.

Other common asthma drugs can have side effects such as hives, abdominal pain, ulcers, seizures, vomiting blood, rapid heart rate, potassium deficiency, increased liver enzymes, reversible hepatitis, severe allergic reactions, and, in rare cases, even death. (3), (10), (11), (12), (13)

Oriental Medicine for Asthma: According to Oriental Medicine, asthma symptoms are actually an indicator of an underlying health imbalance. Acupuncturists treat the whole person rather than the disease, and attempt to get to the root cause of the problem

rather than just treat the symptoms. Oriental medicine sees that the body, given the right conditions, has amazing healing capacities.

Chinese medicine is based on the idea that the human body is a reflection of the natural world. To stay healthy, the body must maintain a balance between the passive and the dynamic energies within the body: yin and yang, which can be represented by the opposing forces of cold and hot, night and day, wet and dry. Just as extremes of climate wreak havoc on the planet, extremes within the body harm it.

As discussed earlier, asthma is an imbalance in the immune system. Oriental Medicine aims to reestablish and maintain internal balance; this builds the overall health of the person so that it is able to heal itself. When the underlying cause is taken care of, the symptoms resolve, and, in the case of asthma, the triggers lose their impact. As holistic practitioners, Acupuncturists consider lifestyle and environmental factors when deciding the best course of treatment, and will include nutritional and lifestyle recommendations as well as acupuncture and herbal formulas.

Most often, in terms of Chinese medicine, asthma is seen as a deficiency in the energy (or Qi “chee”) of the Lungs, Spleen and/or Kidneys, and an accumulation of Phlegm. These can be caused by inappropriate diet, food additives, toxin exposure, repeated upper respiratory infection, genetics, emotional strain, lack of exercise, overwork, and even the asthma medications themselves can contribute to deficiency. Usually it is a combination of these that sets the stage for asthma. An Acupuncture Physician can discuss your health history with you, determine your Oriental medical diagnosis, and create the best plan of action.

Acupuncture for Asthma Acupuncture has been successfully used in China to treat most illnesses over the past 3,500 years, and research has shown that acupuncture can be very effective for respiratory diseases including asthma. The National Institute of Health has stated that:

“The data in support of acupuncture are as strong as those for many accepted Western medical therapies....One of the advantages of acupuncture is that the incidence of

adverse effects is substantially lower than that of many drugs or other accepted medical procedures used for the same conditions.” (14)

Acupuncture can reduce the frequency and severity of attacks: A study conducted at the Department of Anesthesia and Intensive Care in the University Hospital of Vienna showed that over 70% of patients with long-standing asthma reported a significant improvement of their ailments after ten weeks of acupuncture treatment. (15) In another study, Scientists at the Second Municipal People's Hospital, Kaifeng City, China studied 192 patients suffering from bronchial asthma, all of whom were treated by acupuncture. There was a marked improvement in 76.5% of the patients. (16)

Food and Nutrition: Many people are unaware that diet plays a major role in the disease process of asthma. Food intolerance has been well recognized as a contributing factor. Cereal grains high in gluten, such as wheat and oats, are major culprits, as are dairy products, eggs, fish, shellfish, cheese, nuts, and chocolate. It is also best to avoid highly processed foods, and chemical additives, such as food colorings and MSG. Obesity and a diet rich in saturated fats has been found to increase incidents of asthma, while diets rich in vegetables, fiber, vitamin E and C, calcium, magnesium and potassium have much lower risk. Other helpful vitamins and minerals are selenium, zinc, B-vitamins, and glutathione. (3), (15)

Essential fatty acids, found in fish oil, flax seed oil, evening primrose oil and borage oil are very valuable in decreasing inflammation naturally (3). Adding an omega-3 fatty acid supplement and modifying the diet to phase out phlegm causing foods, such as dairy products, fried foods and refined sugars, while increasing water intake is a very important step to reduce asthma symptoms.

Chinese Herbs for Asthma: Chinese herbalists have used herbs for thousands of years to treat respiratory complaints. Chinese herbs are usually prescribed in formulas that combine herbs synergistically to be more balanced and effective. When used appropriately, there are few to no side effects with Chinese herbs, and, unlike pharmaceutical drugs, they promote overall health and wellbeing. It is strongly advised to only take Chinese herbs that have been prescribed by a trained Chinese herbalist, since not all herbs are appropriate for all people and some may not combine well with certain pharmaceutical medications.

Acupuncturists today are using the same principles and methods that have proven themselves over 3500 years, on billions of people. Acupuncture and Oriental medicine addresses the underlying root cause of the problem, and builds the health of the entire person; reducing, and in some cases, altogether eliminating, the symptoms.

Note: If you are currently under the care of an M.D. or D.O., it is recommended that you do not stop your current medications. Acupuncture treatment will assist the goal of your current therapy. If you are interested in decreasing or eliminating your prescription medications, you would need to work gradually toward that goal with your M.D. and your Acupuncture Physician.

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