

Allergies and the Thymus Gland

By Heidi Hawkins, MAc, LAc

One of the most prevalent underlying patterns I see in treating allergies is thymus imbalance. Thymus gland phlegm stagnation is a primary causative factor for allergies. The thymus gland is located in the upper center of the chest, behind the sternum.

This gland runs the immune system.

Allergies are classified as an immune response in Western medicine. Medical texts claim it is normal for the thymus to develop throughout childhood, and to atrophy in adults. I disagree, however. I believe thymus atrophy is endemic rather than normal. As modern allopathic medicine attempts to overtake the responsibilities of a healthy immune system, the system stagnates and atrophies, becoming even less able to fulfill its responsibilities.

The thymus is not directly mentioned in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) texts, though it is implied energetically, as are all aspects of the body/mind/emotions/spirit. TCM has worked brilliantly as a complete system, and continues to do so when applied creatively rather than rigidly or dogmatically, and in the hands of skilled and well-educated TCM practitioners. In my energetic research, I have found the thymus to be most responsive to the spleen, and consider the thymus part of the spleen *zang* system of TCM energetics.

The relationships between different parts of the body can seem infinitely complex. The thymus also has a relationship with the lungs, primarily due to proximity rather than energetic resonance. Whatever imbalance the thymus manifests, if severe enough or left untreated long enough, tends to spread to the lungs, and can also spread to the heart, where it is more likely to become life-threatening. This is because of the location of the thymus gland in the upper *jiao*.

Diagnostically, a thymus stagnated with phlegm may show up in the spleen pulse. If the pulse is more slippery, the phlegm is predominant. If wiry, the excess may be turning to deficiency, which implies

atrophy. If the spleen pulse is weak or deep, the phlegm is likely ethereal and no longer tangible, and is much harder to treat. The thymus is likely atrophic and deficient, secondary to long-term phlegm stasis. Of course, the spleen pulse usually shows the state of the spleen. However, if the pulse shows one of these patterns and the spleen seems relatively balanced, or is not responding well to treatment, the problem may be in the thymus.

In treatment, thymus stagnation will most typically show up as recalcitrant phlegm. When the practitioner attempts to clear phlegm, the treatment is only marginally or temporarily effective. The phlegm may seem limitless. Treating the spleen repeatedly isn't thorough enough or deep enough, and results are minor. A more specific treatment is required to treat thymus problems effectively.

By far the most typical cause of thymus clogging is use of antibiotics. Vaccinations can also play a role, depending on the nature of the vaccine and the person's constitution. Cold, phlegmy, stagnating vaccines are the primary participants, especially the polio vaccine and flu shots. Contrary to popular belief, antibiotics do not typically eliminate a pathogen, but rather, serve to slow it down - often considerably. An acute, raging infection is transformed into a chronic, festering one. This is a great success, as it buys a person more time to sort out their health and examine their options, but because pharmaceutical medications are toxic by definition, there is always a downside to using them. It is up to you to choose wisely, because you are the one who lives with the consequences of your medical choices. If you choose to take antibiotics, it is wise to follow up that choice with care that can eliminate the after-effects, and address chronic conditions effectively. This is where natural medicine excels, by comparison.

Phlegm clogging the thymus is clearly an excess condition in TCM terms. Therefore, other excesses are contributing factors. This includes any excess pattern anywhere in the body, as well as dietary excesses such as overeating or overconsumption of fatty, rich, or overly sweet foods. Dietary excesses commonly lead to the pattern known as food stagnation, which directly affects the spleen and indirectly affects any pre-existing stagnation in the body. An increasingly common but typically unrecognized cause of food stagnation is overuse of dietary supplements, which are usually rich and tonifying in nature. To address a clogged system with tonics is an obvious mistake, but also a very common one. Countless times I have heard clients insist that their immune systems are "weak," when in fact their immune system function is impaired due to stagnation and the deficiency is secondary to phlegm. It is a typical folly of TCM practitioners in the West to be swayed by popular belief when one attempts to integrate Western theory with a TCM practice. It is important to focus on the correct diagnosis within TCM terms in order to not fall prey

to such faulty thinking. Moderately affluent people will be unlikely to show a deficiency pattern in the thymus gland, unless it is the result of a long-term, severe stagnation.

Western thought does not seem to include the notion of too many dietary supplements, unless they have a measurable toxicity. A typical belief appears to be that more is better, without a thought as to how difficult some supplements can be to digest. I am not suggesting dietary supplements are bad, but I often find people are taking far more than they need. Most of the people who can afford to take supplements are more likely to be overnourished rather than undernourished. The practice of excess consumption that is a hallmark among the affluent is a major causative factor for allergies in particular, and makes one more susceptible to lingering pathogenic factors (LPFs).

As practitioners, it is important to consider what supplements our clients are taking, whether or not these supplements are part of the problem, and how to bring about a balanced intake of nourishment. An energetic testing mechanism is an invaluable asset for determining such. (Please see my column "Allergy and Medical Divination" in the October 2000 issue for more information.) Of course, if another practitioner prescribed excessive supplements, ethical and legal dilemmas may ensue. Lay people should be aware of the possibility of overmedication, especially if they are seeing a variety of practitioners or self-medicating, and especially if they have food allergies or an otherwise compromised digestive or immune system.

Eliminating the causes best prevents thymus problems. It is a personal decision to use antibiotics, vaccinations and self-prescribed supplements. I am not suggesting people must avoid such things, but only to be informed of possible detrimental effects, and to address the side-effects of their decisions.

Once the thymus is clogged, it can be treated through TCM modalities. However, merely treating the spleen is only halfway effective. The thymus benefits if treated directly. This can be made much clearer with a modern integration of the energetics of the body's glandular systems. Certainly, I have found medical qigong to be effective, once the diagnosis is clear. Auricular acupuncture can also treat the thymus specifically. A typical protocol for treating thymus congestion with auricular therapy might include the following points: *shenmen*, thymus, *san jiao* and Spleen. It is hoped, as always, that practitioners are adjusting treatment for the individual and diagnosing the TCM pattern correctly, rather than simply following a protocol, as well as locating the ear points very precisely through proper use of the pulse. Some benefit is also likely through treating Ren points locally, such as Ren 17, needling down the channel to drain phlegm downward.

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