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A Sneeze from the Breeze: Colds and Influenza According to Chinese Medicine

By Mitchell Bebel Stargrove, ND, LAc

Wind in the Gorge we know about, but Wind in the body (other than digestive) sounds like something new! All the various maladies we call the “Cold”, the “Flu” and the vague unnamed sense of dilapidation, chills, fever, congestion and sneezing are part of what classical Chinese Medicine would call the Wind syndromes. Yes, as you might guess, wind in the weathery sense is the typical source, or at least provoker, of Wind in the bodily sense.

If you watch an acupuncturist leaving work you’ll often notice the presence of a scarf, or at least a high collar, on a windy day, even in warm weather. In fact, in ancient China, Wind was even considered a type of demon, and acupuncture may originally have been conceived of as tiny spears and arrows fighting these demons. Today, you might not think these ancient images were too far off when you look at the pictures of viruses or bacteria and see their strange shapes, projecting spikes, and generally weird and somewhat threatening appearance.

You may often feel this influence when you’ve been affected by wind walking in from the car or especially out for a stroll on the coast. The shoulders, neck and back of the head are the areas most vulnerable to attack and invasion by Wind. As the wind enters your body and becomes Wind, you start to feel its variations, such as Wind-Heat, Wind-Cold, or, ever-popular in Oregon, Wind-Damp. You might start sneezing, feel chilled and/or feverish, and maybe even achiness in your joints. Sometimes Wind has a tendency to wander or shift; thus our aches move around or we alternate between fevers and chills. If the Cold Wind starts working its way deeper into our body we might even feel so chilly that not even blankets, tea or a warm bath can really comfort and warm us.

If we are in basically good health, eating the right foods, getting some exercise, having fun, and not working too hard, our bodies can often throw off the Wind’s invasion. As you intuitively know, there are plenty of times when you’ve been exposed to something and not become ill – that’s when your basic vitality has been intact and the immune system has been able to fend off those nasty EPIs. According to Chinese medicine, the substance responsible for this protective function is “Wei Qi” (pronounced “way chee”). Like all “Qi”, Wei Qi is an aspect of the body’s vitality, its internal energy system. The word “Wei” shows how this type of Qi acts. Wei was the name given to the soldiers who defended the realm and the Emperor. As these defensive forces of our body fight the invaders we often feel like a battleground. Our neck and shoulders tighten to lock out further invaders and fever and perspiration burn up and cast off the unfriendly forces. With some rest, hot herbal teas, hydrotherapy and some cleansing perspiration we will usually be on the road to recovery, often aided by taking the break we had been postponing.

Given the realities of Oregon weather, the stresses of modern life, and the excesses of seasonal celebrations, our vital force and Wei Qi may not be able to make a quick rout of those invaders. The Wind may stress our bodies enough to allow the ever-present viruses and bacteria to get out of hand. Of course we can remind ourselves that some preventive care and a little loving ourselves might have made



illness avoidable. Nevertheless, when you feel like the Wind has got through to you and your Wei Qi needs some assistance, herbs, homeopathic remedies and acupuncture can all keep you from a week or being sick and a month of feeling exhausted like some of your friends and co-workers. In particular, you'll discover why acupuncturists really love those points on the shoulders and back of the head. As you enjoy your recovery, you'll appreciate that you need to be as patient and attentive with yourself as you do with your job and everybody else. Then the onslaught of the cold, rain, and even the wind won't bother you as much as it might. You'll be able to enjoy your friends and family during the holidays and maybe even admit that you are actually fond of this peculiar Oregon weather.

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