

Exploring Syndrome Differentiation Approaches for Acupuncture Treatment of Allergic Rhinitis Based on the Principle of “Yang Transforms Qi, Yin Forms Substance”

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Abstract: Allergic rhinitis (AR) is a non-infectious inflammatory condition characterized by symptoms such as nasal itching, sneezing, watery nasal discharge, and nasal congestion. It often persists and recurs, posing challenges for effective treatment. Modern medicine primarily employs pharmacotherapy and immunotherapy, yet these treatments may cause adverse reactions. Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) categorizes AR under the term “Bi Qiu,” attributing its etiology to the deficiency of vital energy (Qi) in the lung, spleen, and kidney organs, which makes the body susceptible to wind-cold or abnormal qi, leading to the onset of symptoms. This paper explores the application of the “Yang transforming into Qi and Yin forming shape” theory from the “Huangdi Neijing” in the diagnosis and treatment of AR. Research indicates that Yang deficiency is the root cause of AR, while excessive Yin formation represents the manifestation of the disease. The main treatment principle is to warm and unblock Yang, supplemented by the expulsion of Yin pathogens, providing a new theoretical basis and treatment strategy for the TCM management of AR. This approach holds promise for offering safer and more effective treatment options for patients.

Keywords: Moxibustion, Allergic Rhinitis, Warm Needling, Yang Qi.

1. Introduction

Allergic Rhinitis (AR), also known as allergic rhinitis, is a non-infectious inflammatory condition of the nasal mucosa caused by the inhalation of allergens, characterized by symptoms such as nasal itching, sneezing, watery nasal discharge, and nasal congestion [1, 2]. Modern medicine primarily employs pharmacotherapy and immunotherapy for treatment. Although pharmacotherapy can alleviate symptoms, it often comes with various adverse effects, such as dry mouth, dry eyes, and constipation caused by antihistamines [3].

In traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), AR is categorized under the concept of “Bi Qiu,” which is primarily attributed to the deficiency of the vital energy (Qi) in the lung, spleen, and kidney organs, this deficiency makes the body susceptible to wind-cold or abnormal qi, leading to the onset of symptoms [4]. Acupuncture has been proven to be an effective treatment for AR, with advantages such as simplicity, ease of application, minimal adverse reactions, and a reduced recurrence rate, making it increasingly popular among patients [5]. This paper is based on the TCM theory of “Yang transforming into Qi and Yin forming shape” from the “Huangdi Neijing” (Inner Canon of the Yellow Emperor), which posits that the formation of AR is due to insufficient “Yang transforming into Qi” and excessive “Yin forming shape.” Guided by this theory, this paper explores the application of warming and unblocking Yang methods in the diagnosis and treatment of AR

2. The Theory of Yang Transforming into Qi and Yin Forming Shape

The “Suwen·Yinyang Yingxiang Dalun” (Simple Questions·Great Treatise on the Correspondence between Yin and Yang) states: “Yin is static, Yang is dynamic; Yang gives birth, Yin grows; Yang kills, Yin hides. Yang transforms into Qi, Yin forms shape.” As a core component of the TCM theory of Yin and Yang, “Yang transforming into Qi, Yin forming shape” not only elucidates the dynamic balance between the structure and function of the human body at the physiological level but also provides the intrinsic logic for the occurrence and development of diseases at the pathological level [6].

The “Suwen Wuchang Zhengdalun” (Simple Questions·Great Treatise on the Five Constants) states: “When Yang harmonizes and spreads, Yin follows, and life flourishes. Its transformation is vital, its energy is beautiful, its governance is dispersed, and its command is orderly.” This clearly indicates that Yang is the core of Yin and Yang, and Yang is the starting point of life, playing a dominant role in life activities. The “Suwen Shengqi Tiantian Lun” (Simple Questions·On the Communication between Vital Qi and Heaven) states: “Yang Qi, the refined nourishes the spirit, the gentle nourishes the sinews,” indicating that Yang Qi warms the body, nourishes the viscera, and nurtures the human spirit, ensuring that the body is spirited and functions smoothly. The “Leijing” (Classified Canon) records: “Yang moves and disperses, hence it transforms into Qi. Yin is static and congeals, hence it forms shape,” pointing out that Yang Qi has dynamic and dispersive characteristics. Through the warming and propelling actions of Yang Qi, the generation, distribution, and metabolism of Qi, blood, and body fluids are promoted, ensuring the coordination and balance of visceral functions. The “Nanjing·Wushiwu Nan” (Classic of Difficult Issues·Fifty-Five Difficult Issues) states: “Accumulations are Yin Qi.” Substances with characteristics of stillness, coldness,

form, and coagulation are attributed to Yin. Yin is cold and constricting, coagulating, and transforms the formless Yang Qi into concrete structures such as blood, flesh, and viscera, providing a material carrier for life activities. As the “Huangdi Neijing Suwen Jizhu” (Inner Canon of the Yellow Emperor: Simple Questions: Collected Annotations) states: “Yin forms the shape of all things,” all tangible tissues in the human body fall within the category of “Yin forming shape.” The transformative action of Yang Qi provides the power and energy for the shaping process of Yin Qi, while the shaping process of Yin Qi provides the foundation for the transformative activity of Yang Qi. This organic unity and dynamic balance jointly maintain the integration of form and spirit and the normal functioning of the human body.

“Yang transforming into Qi, Yin forming shape” summarizes the physiological functions of Yang Qi and Yin essence in the human body. The imbalance of “Yang transforming into Qi, Yin forming shape” can also explain pathological conditions in the human body. The imbalance of Yin and Yang is the fundamental cause of disease. As stated in the “Suwen·Yinyang Yingxiang Dalun”: “When Yin prevails, Yang becomes ill; when Yang prevails, Yin becomes ill. When Yang prevails, there is heat; when Yin prevails, there is cold.” Insufficient “Yang transforming into Qi” leads to reduced visceral functions, impaired Qi transformation, and abnormal distribution and excretion of body fluids, resulting in excessive condensation and shaping of Yin fluids. Correspondingly, “Yin forming shape” becomes excessive, leading to the formation of various pathological products such as water retention, blood stasis, and phlegm [7]. These pathological products accumulate in the body, further exacerbating the imbalance of Yin and Yang, creating a vicious cycle that makes diseases chronic and difficult to cure. As stated in the “Suwen·Yinyang Yingxiang Dalun”: “When Yin prevails, Yang becomes ill; when Yang prevails, Yin becomes ill,” revealing the key role of Yin and Yang imbalance in the occurrence of diseases.

3. The Theory of “Yang Transforming into Qi and Yin Forming Shape” and Allergic Rhinitis

3.1 Insufficient Yang as the Root Cause of Disease

Modern research indicates that the etiology of AR is closely associated with genetic and environmental factors [8]. Owing to alterations in contemporary lifestyles and environmental influences, the incidence of AR has been on the rise annually [9]. According to TCM, the pathogenesis of AR primarily stems from the deficiency of vital energy (Qi), which allows pathogenic factors to invade the nasal orifices [10]. As stated in the “Suwen Shengqi Tiantian Lun” (Simple Questions·On the Communication between Vital Qi and Heaven): “In the essentials of Yin and Yang, Yang must be dense to be solid. If the two are not in harmony, it is like having spring without autumn, or winter without summer. To harmonize them is the sage’s measure. Therefore, if Yang is strong but not dense, Yin Qi will be exhausted.” Yang plays a dominant role in human life activities; hence, a deficiency in vital energy equates to insufficient Yang. Vital energy encompasses the defensive and nutrient Qi, as well as the Qi of the viscera. In AR, “insufficient Yang” manifests as deficiencies in lung Qi,

spleen Yang, and kidney Yang.

3.1.1 Lung Qi Deficiency and Invasion by External Pathogens

The lung governs the skin and hair, regulates Qi and respiration, and is connected to the nose, which serves as the gateway to the lung. Therefore, the primary site of AR is the lung. The lung is a delicate organ, susceptible to pathogenic invasions. In AR patients, lung Qi is weak, and defensive Yang is insufficient, leading to impaired external defense. External pathogens invade the body through the nose and enter the lung, disrupting the lung’s functions of dispersing and descending, and impairing its ability to regulate water passages. This results in nasal congestion, rhinorrhea, and frequent sneezing, often exacerbated by changes in weather [11].

3.1.2 Spleen Yang Deficiency and Impaired Qi Transformation

The spleen is responsible for transforming and transporting nutrients, distributing refined substances to nourish the entire body, including the nasal orifices. A healthy spleen ensures strong lung function and sufficient defensive Qi to protect against external pathogens [12]. When spleen Qi is deficient, the production of Qi and blood is inadequate, and the transportation of body fluids is impaired, leading to the internal generation of phlegm and dampness, which can disturb the clear orifices. This manifests as nasal congestion, dizziness, heavy head, pale and edematous nasal mucosa, accompanied by shortness of breath, weak voice, fatigue, pale complexion, spontaneous sweating, and a weak pulse. Insufficient spleen Yang further exacerbates the formation and accumulation of phlegm and dampness.

3.1.3 Kidney Yang Deficiency and Impaired Fluid Metabolism

The kidney is the foundation of congenital essence, and kidney Yang, also known as the original Yang, is the root of the body’s Yang Qi. When kidney Yang is deficient, fluid metabolism is impaired, leading to the accumulation of phlegm and fluid retention, resulting in clear nasal discharge, mucosal edema, and nasal obstruction. As stated in the “Suwen Xuanming Wuxi Lun” (Simple Questions·On the Clarification of the Five Qi): “Among the diseases of the five Qi, the kidney is associated with yawning and nasal discharge.” Insufficient kidney Yang and weakened life gate fire lead to abnormal functions of warming and transforming fluids, causing cold fluid to rise and persistent clear nasal discharge [13].

3.2 Yin Formation Excess as the Manifestation of Disease

3.2.1 Yang Deficiency and External Pathogenic Invasion

When the internal organs are damaged and Yang energy is insufficiently generated, the defensive function is impaired, making the body susceptible to external pathogens. Wind pathogen is the leader of all diseases; when it invades the skin and affects the Yang meridians, it disrupts the function of Wei Qi, leading to loose pores and open pores, causing frequent sneezing and nasal discharge [14]; Cold pathogen invades

externally, first affecting the Yang meridians. Cold pathogen causes contraction and stagnation of Qi pathways, leading to obstruction of Wei Qi, dysfunction of warming and nourishing as well as defensive functions, resulting in sneezing [15]; Dampness pathogen is characterized by a prolonged disease course, being difficult to cure and prone to recurrence. Dampness often combines with wind and cold pathogens, obstructing the flow of Qi and impeding the collaterals, causing stagnation of Qi and blood in the collaterals, impairing the functions of the spleen and lung, and disrupting the transformation and transportation of Qi. When the spleen fails to ascend clear Qi, the lung lacks nourishment, leading to impaired dispersing and descending functions. When the stomach fails to descend turbid Qi, the lung Qi becomes obstructed, and the descending function is impaired, resulting in nasal dysfunction and frequent sneezing. Heat pathogen causes lung heat, impairing the lung's functions of dispersing and descending. Heat rising upward leads to nasal congestion, and the body's attempt to expel the pathogen results in frequent sneezing [16].

3.2.2 Yang Deficiency and Internal Generation of Yin Pathogens

Due to insufficient "Yang transforming into Qi" function, the functions of the viscera are reduced, leading to deficiencies in the lung, spleen, and kidney. This results in abnormal metabolism of body fluids, with Qi deficiency failing to propel the movement of body fluids, causing them to not be properly distributed and excreted. This leads to excessive "Yin forming shape," with excessive condensation of Yin fluids, resulting in the formation of pathological products such as water retention and phlegm. As stated in the "Zhu Bing Yuan Hou Lun" (Treatise on the Etiology and Symptoms of Diseases): "All diseases with clear and cold body fluids belong to cold." Insufficient Yang leads to a predominance of Yin cold, with pathological products such as water retention and phlegm lingering in the body, lodging in the nasal collaterals, and gradually forming stasis heat over time. Symptoms include redness and swelling of the nasal mucosa, hypertrophy of the nasal turbinates, and adenoid hypertrophy. Qi deficiency and blood stasis impede the flow of Qi and blood, preventing clear Qi from ascending, resulting in nasal congestion and loss of smell [17]. The "Xue Zheng Lun" (Treatise on Blood Diseases) points out that "stasis blood transforms into water, also causing edema, which is a combination of blood disease and water retention." Blood stasis further exacerbates nasal mucosal edema, and when external wind induces it, symptoms such as nasal congestion, rhinorrhea, and sneezing recur.

4. The Theory of "Yang Transforming into Qi and Yin Forming Shape" in the Treatment of Allergic Rhinitis

Acupuncture has the effects of unblocking meridians, harmonizing yin and yang, and supporting the body's defenses to expel pathogens, thereby enhancing the body's vital energy to prevent and treat diseases. Research has shown that acupuncture can regulate immune cells, reduce immunoglobulin E levels, and repair nasal mucosal epithelial cells, thereby reducing inflammatory infiltration and alleviating the symptoms of allergic rhinitis (AR) [18]. The

theory of "Yang transforming into Qi and Yin forming shape" provides a new therapeutic approach for AR, emphasizing the need to warm and unblock Yang to support "Yang transforming into Qi" and prevent excessive "Yin forming shape."

4.1 Warming and Unblocking Yang Qi

The pathogenesis of AR is a prolonged process of contention between the body's defenses and external pathogens. The function of "Yang transforming into Qi" is reduced, while the function of "Yin forming shape" is relatively enhanced, leading to the formation of pathological substances such as stasis and phlegm. "Yang deficiency leads to cold congealing, and Yang fails to distribute body fluids" is an important pathogenesis of AR. Treating the root cause of the disease, the overall principle of treatment should be to warm and unblock Yang Qi, ensuring that the body's Yang Qi is dominant. Zhongren found through a network meta-analysis that acupuncture is more effective in treating allergic rhinitis than Western medicine, with moxibustion being one of the optimal treatments for AR [19]. Lu Jinxian [20] discovered in the acupuncture treatment of AR that the selection of acupoints primarily focuses on local points and meridian combinations, emphasizing the principle of combining pathogen expulsion and defense support. In terms of meridian selection, the main focus is on the Yang meridians of the foot Taiyang bladder, hand Yangming large intestine, and the Governing Vessel, regulating the Yang Qi of these three meridians to adjust the visceral Qi mechanisms, thereby achieving the effect of replenishing Yang Qi. Zhou Sudi divided patients into a group treated with acupuncture combined with moxibustion and a group treated with oral cetirizine hydrochloride. The results showed that the combined acupuncture and moxibustion therapy effectively treats allergic rhinitis, with clinical efficacy superior to that of cetirizine hydrochloride alone [21]. Hu Rong used moxibustion for preventive treatment of seasonal allergic rhinitis, dividing patients into moxibustion, drug, and observation groups. After treatment, the results indicated that the long-term effects of moxibustion therapy were better than those of the drug group [22]. Pan Qingchun [23] used warm needling combined with a nasal unblocking formula to treat patients with chronic sinusitis, significantly improving quality of life, reducing inflammatory reactions, and enhancing clinical efficacy. Ding Dingming [24] divided patients into a moxibustion group and a traditional Chinese medicine group. Both groups showed a decrease in plasma IL-2, IL-6, and cGMP levels after treatment, with more significant reductions in the moxibustion group. Modern research [25, 26] suggests that the central temperature of burning mugwort leaves can produce special thermal signals, including infrared rays. These thermal signals are transmitted through acupuncture points, warming and stimulating Yang Qi, activating visceral functions, and regulating the viscera through the meridians. Moxibustion is involved in various immune responses of the human body, regulating immune function and is an effective method for treating allergic diseases. The application of moxibustion can cause local skin congestion, capillary dilation, enhanced local blood and lymph circulation, relief and elimination of smooth muscle spasms, and strengthened local tissue metabolism, promoting the dispersion and absorption of pathological products such as inflammatory substances, adhesions, exudates, and

hematomas. These effects may be related to the ability of moxibustion to reduce serum IL-2 and IL-6 levels and lower cGMP content.

4.2 Expelling Yin Pathogens in the Treatment of Allergic Rhinitis

Modern acupuncture treatment for AR primarily combines local acupoint selection with meridian-based acupoint selection. Commonly used acupoints include Yintang (EX-HN3), Yingxiang (LI20), Hegu (LI4), Feishu (BL13), Zusanli (ST36), Fengchi (GB20), Shenshu (BL23), Pishu (BL20), Shangyingxiang (EX-HN8), and Dazhui (GV14). The main meridians selected are the Bladder Meridian, Large Intestine Meridian, and Governing Vessel [27, 28]. Stimulating these acupoints can unblock meridian energy, achieving the effects of dispersing lung Qi, regulating Qi flow, and unblocking the nasal orifices. He Gu (LI4) is a source point of the Large Intestine Meridian, known for its functions of dispelling wind, resolving superficial symptoms, dispersing lung Qi, and unblocking the nose. It can be used to treat various diseases of the head and face. Yintang (EX-HN3) is a Governing Vessel point. Stimulating this point can unblock local meridian energy, tonify Qi, support Yang, disperse cold, and unblock collaterals. Yingxiang (LI20) is an extra-meridian point and also a Large Intestine Meridian point. Needling these points can unblock meridian energy, achieving the effects of dispersing lung Qi, regulating Qi flow, and unblocking the nasal orifices. Liang Feihong [29] observed the effects of acupoint injection at Yintang and Yingxiang on the expression of histamine H1 receptor (H1R) and histamine H4 receptor (H4R) in the nasal mucosa of rats with allergic rhinitis. Histamine (HA) plays a dominant role in multiple stages of AR pathogenesis. It is a key inflammatory mediator that activates H1 receptors on the trigeminal nerve endings in the nasal mucosa, triggering action potentials [30, 31]. This leads to nasal itching and sneezing, increased vascular permeability, microvascular dilation, tissue edema, increased eosinophil counts, and enhanced secretory activity, resulting in a series of AR symptoms [32]. Stimulating the Yintang and Yingxiang points significantly downregulates the expression of H1R and H4R proteins and mRNA in the nasal mucosa, reducing inflammatory mediators. This shortens the inflammatory response process and inhibits or blocks the inflammatory response, effectively treating AR.

5. Conclusion

In summary, this paper proposes that the core pathogenesis of AR lies in the deficiency of Yang Qi and impaired Qi transformation, leading to the excessive formation of Yin-related pathologies such as cold, fluid retention, and phlegm. This study not only deepens the understanding of the TCM essence of AR but also systematically constructs a theoretical and clinical framework that integrates “pathogenesis - treatment principle - acupoint selection - therapeutic effect.” This framework provides clear theoretical guidance and practical strategies for acupuncture treatment of AR. The results demonstrate that the acupuncture treatment protocol centered on warming Yang and dispersing cold to unblock the orifices is effective and holds significant clinical value for wider application.

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