

# Ayurveda vs. flu season

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**T**he flu season typically begins in December and peaks in January and March. It is reassuring to know that the Centers for Disease Control are well prepared and there is no shortage of vaccine for the up-coming flu season. But there is no way to predict what kind of flu this flu season will bring upon us, and that alone limits the usefulness of a vaccine. That is why it is so important to start preventive steps on your own and strengthen your body for a possible attack by a virus. Preventive measures are particularly important for the elderly and those with underlying medical problems ranging from heart disease to asthma, infectious and inflammatory diseases and disorders – all conditions that weaken the body's defense or immune system against the flu virus.

Flu is almost synonymous with the upper respiratory tract infection, and Ayurveda is an example of a long standing tradition that offers a unique insight into comprehensive care of the respiratory tract. In Ayurveda, respiratory tract functions are interrelated with those of another organ that introduces nourishment (lungs bring oxygen as nutrient) to the body, viz., the stomach. It is believed there that phlegm humor or Kapha (which is one of the three basic humors) is produced in the stomach and then accumulates in the lungs. Excess of Kapha makes the respiratory system prone to flu infection. Correcting imbalances in the basic humors, including Kapha, can be achieved through proper nutrition and digestion. Proper nutrition is particularly important during autumn season, since this season signifies a sluggish and inefficient digestive process causing accumulation of Kapha, which sets-up our body for the flu. The menu for autumn should be light, avoiding fried

foods, meat, dairy products, alcoholic drinks, and a morning cup of coffee should be replaced with a cup of tea (preferably green tea). Care should be taken for eating well balanced, regular meals in moderate quantities, particularly by those who suffer from inflammatory bowel disorders (Crohn's, ulcerative colitis), gastritis and ulcerative disease. In addition, strenuous exercise should be avoided and sexual activity should be limited during autumn to prevent weakening the immune system (imbalance of Kapha).

One of the important aspects of dealing with an upcoming flu season is stressing proper nutritional supplements. Ayurvedic formulations used in the prevention and treatment of respiratory tract ailments related to flu, judiciously combine herbs for breathing support with antioxidant herbs, such as *Curcuma longa* also known as **Haldi**, to support the immune and digestive functions, expectorant herbs as well as respiratory tract soothing herbs.

## HERBS IMPROVING AREATION OF LUNGS

*Piper longum* (long pepper) traditionally known in Sanskrit as **Pippali** has been used in Ayurveda and its related Unani medicine in the prevention and treatment of respiratory congestion and bronchial asthma. In a study involving asthma patients, preventive use of long pepper for several months significantly reduced the frequency and severity of the attacks.

*Adathoda vasica* known in Ayurveda by its Sanskrit name **Vasaka** has been traditionally included in preparations for the relief of cough, asthma and bronchitis. Evaluation of the mechanisms behind the respiratory

claims of Vasaka indicate that the alkaloid vasicine has bronchodilating properties and a mechanism of action that enhances clearing of the air passages. Another important example of an Ayurveda derived herb used in respiratory conditions is *Tylophora indica* (asthmatica) – Sanskrit **Anthrapachaka**. The therapeutic properties of this herb are particularly well documented in the treatment of bronchial asthma.

## HERBS SUPPORTING THE IMMUNE SYSTEM OF THE BODY

**A***ndrographis paniculata* or **Kyriat** has been successfully clinically tested in Nordic countries for relief and reduction in duration of the flu symptoms. This plant is traditionally used in formulae to treat infectious diseases, primarily by improving the body's immune response to the infectious agent. *Ocimum sanctum* or **Tulsi** is a very popular herb in Hindu tradition and by virtue of its traditional use and scientific data it belongs to a group of *Rasayana* herbs currently described as **adaptogens** or **bioprotectants**. Tulsi reduces the effect of mental and physical stress on the body, thus diminishing or preventing the draining effects of stress on the immune system. This relation between stress and the immune system and flu is better understood in view of the well known phenomenon that people who suffered an emotional upset are more likely to develop the flu.

## DIGESTIVE FUNCTIONS SUPPORT

**T**he fruits of *Terminalia chebula*, **Hirada**; *Terminalia bellerica*, **Bahera**; and *Emblica officinalis*, **Amla**; combined in equal proportions are known as **Triphala**. This formula and its individual ingredients are highly valued in Ayurveda, being compared to a

"good manager of the house" in aiding digestion, nutrient absorption and body metabolism. Triphala can be particularly useful in alleviating indigestion that is more likely to occur during the autumn season. The combination of **ginger root** with **black pepper** and **long pepper** fruits is known in Ayurveda as **Trikatu**, and used as one of the most popular digestive aids. In small amounts this combination may act like a natural antacid. It should also be mentioned that use of **probiotics** (lactic acid producing bacteria) and **digestive enzymes** (preferably obtained through a fermentation process) should be advocated in particular during the autumn and especially by those who are elderly or sickly.

## ANTIOXIDANTS

**I**n moderation antioxidants offer excellent support to many body functions, and contrary to the "anti" prefix they promote aeration of the tissues by disposing of free radicals which rob tissue of needed oxygen. The shivering you experience in prodromal (early) stages of flu is caused by compounds called pyrogens which act like free radicals and generate free radicals. Antioxidants can not only alleviate the symptoms, but possibly act directly to slow down the multiplying of the virus. *Curcuma longa*, (turmeric root) and its yellow principles called curcuminoids, are well recognized as versatile phenolic anti-oxidants which also have anti-bacterial and anti-viral properties. Curcuminoids are being recognized now as providing a two-pronged anti-oxidant activity: **prevention** of free radical formation and **intervention** to neutralize existing free radicals. This action of curcuminoids exemplifies a new mechanism, characteristic of therapeutic ingredients, called "bioprotectants".

**Green tea** is another example of a bioprotectant which, based on

preliminary study, can prevent flu virus from entering the cell, and thus infecting it. In the same study Amandatine, a promising anti-flu drug, required up to 100 times higher concentration than the green tea catechins to match their anti-viral potential. **Selenium** is a trace element, particularly recommended in a bound form with the amino acid methionine (selenomethionine), which forms body's most versatile antioxidant defense called glutathione system. Based on epidemiological studies there is a high positive correlation between body selenium levels, glutathione levels and the overall state of good health. The next best form of supplemental **zinc** after **Zinc Bashma**, a traditional preparation in Ayurveda medicine, is zinc monomethionine. This latter form of zinc is highly bioavailable and therefore provides the essential trace element to form enzymes that participate in anti-oxidant reactions, and as a support to various immune functions. Although there is no firm evidence that vitamin C is preventing or combating flu virus infection, this vitamin is a good anti-oxidant and is recommended as such. However non-acidic forms of this vitamin should be chosen to avoid upsetting the digestive functions.

## RESPIRATORY TRACT SOOTHING HERBS

**P**robably one of the most versatile herbs that is used in alleviating a sore throat, as well as stomach irritation, is **licorice**. Licorice is traditionally combined with numerous herbs to alleviate respiratory distress. The combination which is recommended for flu season is with ginger, which acts as an decongestant and alleviates irritation of mucosa of respiratory as well as gastrointestinal tracts.

**T**o your health with a cup of (green) tea!

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