



Common Health Conditions series - Rhinitis (Part II)

Rhinitis Prevention and Treatment

Rhinitis refers to an inflammation of the nasal passage, broadly differentiated between allergic and non-allergic rhinitis. Its symptoms range from sneezing, runny nose, watery eyes to even loss of smell. The first step in the prevention and treatment of rhinitis is to obtain an accurate diagnosis, as rhinitis is often confused with cold.

Inflammation of the nasal passage can be prevented by avoiding the triggers that stimulate the onset of inflammation. The common triggers are pollen, house dust mites, pet dander, mold and cockroaches. For others, irritants such as air pollutants, detergents, temperature changes, humidity or even spicy food worsen the rhinitis symptoms. In both, avoidance of triggers and irritants is recommended.

Is Prevention Possible?

Given that rhinitis is a condition that requires treatment overtime and can significantly impact school and work if severe, many parents and patients are interested to find out if prevention is

possible. Prevention can be understood on two different levels: (i) primary prevention, which is preventing the onset or occurrence of the condition and (ii) prevention of future flare-ups.

Studies conducted on primary prevention are non-conclusive and thus, there is no full-proof method to ensuring that a newborn baby will never get rhinitis. The more commonly studied factors are related to breastfeeding, probiotics, diet, environmental exposure, introduction of the common food allergens and smoking. As rhinitis is a multi-factorial and complex condition, intervention in only one area is unlikely to be successful.

For rhinitis sufferers, the main prevention of future flare-ups is in avoidance of the triggers. It may however not be as easy if (i) not all the triggers of rhinitis are known and (ii) certain triggers, like pollen which is light and travel far, cannot be fully eliminated. Various ways to avoid the common triggers are:

- ✦ Pollen – Reduced outdoors during the season/time of day when the particular pollen count is high and keep windows closed. Change of outside clothes can also help.
- ✦ House dust mites – At least weekly change of bed linens, towels and washing them in water of at least 60 degrees Celsius. Avoid dry-dusting but instead wet wipe surfaces.
- ✦ Pet dander – The best avoidance is not to have pets. Otherwise, keep pets away from the home or the bedroom. Shower pets outside of the house.
- ✦ Mold and cockroach – Reduced mold and cockroach by making your home a non-conductive environment for them to thrive. This is by ensuring that your home is not too humid, clean and dry surfaces and remove hiding places for cockroaches such as those near pipes or the dustbin.
- ✦ Air pollutants – Install an air-purifier and use a high efficiency particulate air (HEPA) vacuum cleaner. Avoid first-hand, second-hand and even third-hand tobacco smoke.

Treatment Methods

The common treatment options taken by western medicine approach is relieving of the symptoms via antihistamines. These are sometimes sedating and do not work for some patients. Nasal corticosteroids or decongestants may also be prescribed, but some patients may experience side effects such as nasal dryness. Moreover, overuse

of nasal decongestants for more than a few days are associated with aggravating the rhinitis symptoms.



For more severe symptoms, topical nasal steroids are usually recommended by doctors but these have to be taken regularly (usually on daily basis) and for long-term. In recent years, sublingual immunotherapy (SLIT) has gained

popularity to treat allergies, but it requires the patient to apply the drops or tablet under the tongue daily for 3 to 5 consecutive years to develop a lasting immunity.

Other treatment methods adopted by ENT surgeons include radiofrequency of the inferior turbinates, and/or removal of the over-swollen nasal polyps or enlarged tonsillitis through surgery; these treatment methods however are invasive and more costly, and often are not long-term solutions as the chances of relapse are high.

As opposed to western medicine, TCM works to strengthen the immune system

thereby enabling the body to withstand against triggers. As not all triggers can be 100% avoided or identified, enhancing one's immune system is a better defense than mere avoidance of triggers. Various approaches may be undertaken by TCM physicians in prevention:

- a) TCM supplements - These are tailored for the individual by the physician, but generally serve to balance the 'qi' in the body to enhance the body's immunity.
- b) Herbal inhalation - This is a unique TCM therapy to reduce the inflammation of the patient's nasal cavities and

restore body balance, by inhaling the herbal steam.

- c) Exercise - TCM adopts a holistic approach to treatment and exercise may be recommended to strengthen the immune system.
- d) Air purification - Humidifiers filled with TCM's prescription may be prescribed, to combat virus and bacteria.

These TCM treatments are non-sedating and aim to not only relieve the symptoms but strengthen the immune system.

Treat Early to Prevent Complications

Rhinitis has a considerable effect on the quality of life, with constant discomfort from sneezing and congestion. Even if patients feel that they can live with the discomfort, there is the possibility of complications such as sinusitis, chronic ear infection, loss of smell, asthma, nasal polyps and obstructive sleep apnea - which often leads to heart diseases and the related death.

Of these complications, sinusitis is often confused with rhinitis. Sinusitis is an inflammation or infection of the tissue lining inside the nasal sinuses, which are hollow cavities within the cheek bones, around the eyes and behind the nose to warm, moisten and filter air. When sinuses become blocked and filled with fluid, germs (bacteria, viruses, and fungi) can grow and cause an infection. Besides having symptoms similar to Rhinitis, sinusitis patients will also suffer from facial pain, bad breath and dental pain.

It is therefore important to treat rhinitis early, strengthen the immune system and prevent complications arising from prolonged untreated rhinitis.