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Many people suffer from frequent upper respiratory infections, with symptoms of running nose, sore throat, postnasal dripping, headache, and/or cough. This process can often recur every couple of months, especially in young and elderly patients. Common understanding about the causes of this condition includes environmental allergies, and viral and bacterial infections. However, from my own clinical experience, a gut problem is sometimes the root issue for this condition.

Chinese medicine believes that upper respiratory infection is a Lung issue. The Lung organ is closely related to the Large Intestine, being an internal–external pair. A chronic Lung problem is often related to the Intestines. Western physiology also shows that the mouth, sinus, and nose cavities are direct extensions of the digestive tract. Thus, a problematic digestive system may cause chronic inflammation in the mucous membranes of the sinus, nose, and mouth. A common digestive problem is dysbiosis. The term refers to a condition with microbial imbalances, such as yeast overgrowth (candidiasis) and the decline of the beneficial bacteria. Dysbiosis of the digestive tract often leads to dysbiosis of the sinuses and throat, causes inflammation of the mucous membranes, weakens the immune systems, and results in bacterial infections later on. Antibiotics often suppress bacterial infections but promote Candida spp. outbreaks and lead the body to a vicious cycle of frequent recurrent infections. Candida-induced inflammation may be one of the major causes for frequent upper respiratory infections.

Chinese medicine describes the above condition as Dampness and Heat. The treatment principle is to cleanse the Dampness from the digestive system and clear the Heat from the Lungs and Large Intestine. Based on my clinical experiences, dietary change is necessary to reduce the Dampness and Heat and maintain a healthy gut. The popular American diet contains too much sugar and refined carbohydrates. This food may include sugary drinks, candy, chocolate, ice cream, cakes, cookies, bagels, breads, pizza, pasta, breakfast cereals, pancakes, waffles and chips, etc. Everything containing sugar or that converts to sugar quickly inside the body will feed the intestinal yeast population—such as Candida—which produces mycotoxins and triggers a series of pathophysiological responses.

Healthy eating is a must to reduce Candida overgrowth. Increasing protein and fiber intake—such as fish, meat, chicken, eggs, fruits and vegetables—and reducing refined carbohydrates—such as wheat products—are highly recommended. Dairy products are not recommended due to the hyperallergenic nature of milk and possible mold contamination in cheeses. For patients who follow vegan diets, nuts and beans are these patients’ major protein sources. Breakfast choices may include rice or organic corn–based crackers; gluten-free bread with peanut butter, almond butter, or sunflower seed butter; almond milk or organic soy milk; and walnuts and other tree nuts. Protein powders from rice or organic soy can be supplemented. Lunch and dinner options include salads with nuts and fruits, vegetable bean soup and a tofu-based main dish. In Asian culture, tofu can be cooked in specific ways that taste like meat, chicken, or fish. Being creative is key in vegan diets.

In addition to healthy eating, intestinal cleansing and detoxifying Candida, other bad bacteria, and parasites are necessary to stop the vicious cycle of recurrent infections. Many natural supplements can be used to cleanse the gut including turmeric (Curcuma spp.) root, garlic (Allium sativum) and oregano (Origanum vulgare) leaf. Chinese herbs that cleanse Dampness and Heat may include Huo Xiang (Herba Agastaches Rugosus) and Long Dan Cao (Radix Gentianae Scabrae). To treat chronic upper respiratory infections in patients with digestive issues, I often use a combination of the Chinese herbal formulas Huang Lian Shang Qing Wan and Long Dan Xie Gan Wan to clear the Heat and Dampness. For elderly patients, Qi tonic herbs, Huang Qi (Astragalus spp.) and Bai Zhu (Atractylodes macrocephala) may be used to support Spleen and Lung Deficiency.

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Upper respiratory infections (URIs) in the elderly population are commonly seen in general practice. Elderly persons who suffer from URIs can have decreased daily activity and slower recovery from the illness, might access healthcare services more frequently, and could have more severe complications.