

Naturopathy: Not to be sneezed at

By Amber Cowan

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Honey and acupuncture helped one hay fever sufferer to heal herself

For most of us, colds and congestion are common winter ailments, and there are very few who escape the chilliest months without sniffles of some sort. For French tutor Odile Williams, 47, though, they were a year-round fact of life. "I would spend all day with a handkerchief in my hand," she says. "I had a runny nose, runny eyes and terrible headaches."

Apart from suffering from perennial rhinitis, or year-round cold symptoms, Williams was also allergic to house dust and cat hair. "We have two cats that I refused to get rid of, so I felt permanently terrible." Her symptoms, however were worse during the summer months, when, like one in seven of us according to the medical charity Allergy UK, the pleasing sensations of warm breezes and freshly mown grass would leave her with bloodshot eyes, a snuffly nose and a permanent feeling of tiredness.

Thousands of British people are allergic to the airborne substances such as pollen and dust that get into the nose, the mouth and the eyes. Williams's allergies meant an uncomfortable choice between streaming sinuses or taking antihistamines that left her in a drugged fug. "Even non-drowsy medication would make me feel groggy," she says. "My nose would clear up but it was like swapping one handicap for another."

After fifteen years of experimenting with over-the-counter remedies and prescription nasal sprays, she first considered an alternative approach six years ago when she visited Michael van Straten, a naturopath and acupuncturist, for a back problem. Naturopathy is based on the belief that the body will heal itself once its natural equilibrium is restored. Diet, exercise, hydrotherapy and fresh air are used to treat everything from allergies to arthritis and skin conditions. Van Straten noticed her debilitating sniffles and suggested naturopathic remedies and a course of acupuncture to help manage the symptoms.

"I've found that a combination of nutritional changes and acupuncture works better than most things when it comes to treating hay fever," says van Straten, who has been practising for 40 years. "It doesn't work for everybody but it can be amazingly successful when it does."

Williams began an intensive seven-week course, visiting van Straten, who is based in Cheddington, Bedfordshire, twice a week for treatments. "The theory of acupuncture is that it affects the flow of energy to the affected organs and systems of the body," he says. "We have millions of little hairs in the nose that work in a waving motion, wafting mucus and detritus out of the nasal passages. When someone has hay fever, these flows are either blocked or overstimulated.

Acupuncture helps to stimulate the nerve supplies to the muscles that control those hairs so that you loosen the sticky mucus and allow the body to get rid of it."

Although van Straten admits that he doesn't know how it works physiologically, Williams says that she noticed the results immediately. "The effect was amazing. Lying down with the needles in, I could literally feel the catarrh trickling away. Afterwards I would be aware of my sinuses physically clearing."

After the initial seven weeks, Williams needed top-up appointments only once a month for the rest of the summer. To help lessen mucus production, van Straten also recommended the naturopathic remedy of cutting out dairy products for three months and he suggested that Williams eat two spoonfuls of organic honey a day, produced by local bees. "Local bees collect pollen from the same plants that trigger your allergies," he says. "By giving your body almost homoeopathic doses of these pollens, you are desensitising yourself."

Three years on, Williams no longer feels separation anxiety from her packet of tissues and says that her allergies are no longer a problem. Van Straten says: "Nobody but a lunatic would deny the benefits of the modern pharmaceutical industry. But when there are safer alternatives, why use a sledgehammer to crack a nut?"

What is it?

Naturopathy is based on the idea that you can heal your body by optimising its natural equilibrium. Diet, exercise, fresh air, hydrotherapy and relaxation techniques can all be used, and many naturopaths also employ the complementary therapies of acupuncture, herbalism and homoeopathy.

SUITABLE FOR virtually all chronic diseases, particularly rheumatic and arthritic conditions. Also good for allergies, hypertension and stress-related conditions.

COST From between £35 and £100 for an initial consultation.

CONTACT the General Council and Register of Naturopaths: 01458 840072; www.naturopathy.org.uk

WHAT'S THE EVIDENCE?

DR TOBY MURCOTT

How could this treatment cure hay fever? With acupuncture, honey and cutting out dairy all used together, it's impossible to tell. This is a common problem; complementary therapies often have multiple treatments and clinical trials are best at looking at one thing at a time.

What about the individual elements? A trial of 78 patients who were sensitive to pollen, at Helsinki University Central Hospital in 1995, showed that they were not allergic to honey with traces of pollen in it. This could suggest that honey blocks the allergic reaction or that it "hides" the pollen from the body's immune system. Also, the principle of using small amounts of allergen to desensitise sufferers is well established and used in many orthodox allergy treatments. However, a trial in 2002 at the University of Connecticut on 36 patients showed that taking a tablespoon of honey a day did nothing for their allergic reactions.

And the acupuncture? There is evidence from clinical trials that acupuncture calms allergic rhinitis. But a study last year at Gothenburg University in Sweden concluded that it had no effect. The idea that it activates the tiny hairs, called cilia, in the nose is engaging, but there is no evidence for it. The message from this is acupuncture might be effective but more research is needed.