

## HEALTH

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## TCM: chilblains

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**Rose Tse and Jenny Eagleton**

In winter small, itchy, painful swellings may appear on the skin after exposure to the cold. This is chilblains: the name is a combination of the words chill and blain, the latter coming from the Old English "blegen", meaning a sore.

The body's circulatory system is sensitive to temperature. In hot environments, blood vessels close to the skin expand so that excess heat can be lost to the air, thereby cooling the body. In cold weather, these blood vessels constrict to conserve body heat. This constriction can starve extremities of blood and warmth if the peripheral circulation is not flowing smoothly.

Chilblains are likely to occur on the extremities such as the toes, fingers,

nose and earlobes, which are the first areas to become cold. They develop as a localised vascular inflammation and are thought to be an abnormal skin reaction to cold. For example, if the skin is chilled and then followed by a too rapid warming such as before an electric fire, chilblains may develop.

In simple cases, the red bumps will go away by themselves in a week or so, and the only remedy in these instances is a soothing cream to ease the itching and pain. However, should the chilblains turn dark blue, blisters form on them or become ulcerous, you should seek medical attention.

Diet, poor circulation and other factors can cause some people to break out in chilblains every winter. Traditional Chinese medicine suggests such sores be

treated with internal as well as external approaches in order to lessen the chance of a recurrence of the problem.

The cold of winter is the yin in nature that tends to attack the meridians and makes the blood vessels constrict. The underlying cause for recurrent chilblains is blood and *chi* deficiencies that lead to a lower resistance to external cold. Remedies should aim to ensure the blood and *chi* flow to the extremities, and also disperse coldness in the meridians.

Common ingredients for dispersing coldness in the meridians include processed ginger, cassia bark, cassia twig and ephedra. Angelica root, processed rhemannia rhizome and suberect spatholobus stem can be taken for replenishing blood; while astragalus

root, liquorice root and pilose asiabell root are for replenishing *chi*.

When damage to the skin from the cold is serious, it can lead to severe pain and numbness and in order to stimulate further warming of the meridians one can use ingredients such as aconite root, medicinal evodia fruits and Manchurian wild ginger.

Blood stasis that causes a lesion to turn dark blue can be healed by using peony root and red sage root. A typical prescription is called Angelica Decoction for Frigid Extremities, in which angelica root, cassia twig and white peony root are the major ingredients.

Externally, use herbal washes comprising ingredients such as cassia twig, Chinese safflower, aconite root, schizonepeta herb, perilla leaf and

angelica root (five grams each). Prepare the concoction as a warm solution and soak the sore for 20 minutes each night. This can help improve the body's circulation, and greatly reduce the number of chilblains attacks or the severity of them.

Sufferers are recommended to eat ginger, cinnamon, peppers, red dates, yams, mushrooms, leeks, nuts and beef as these foods promote body warmth and will help them to resist winter's cold. People with chilblains should avoid frozen and raw foods.

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**Rose Tse and Jenny Eagleton are with Integrated Chinese Medicine Holdings (icm.com.hk). Before taking any medicine, consult your TCM or medical practitioner.**