

TCM

Stem the phlegm

In autumn and winter, coughs are easy to catch due to the vulnerability of the respiratory system amid sudden changes in the weather.

According to traditional Chinese medicine theory, the lungs play an important role in water metabolism. When the lungs are disturbed, water accumulates and stagnates in the body and pathological products such as phlegm are formed. The phlegm can then act on the lungs, resulting in coughing or wheezing.

Fritillary bulb is a well-known phlegm-dispersing herb in TCM. It's the bulb of perennial plants in the Liliaceae family. There are about 80 species of bulbs, mostly from perennial plants. Sichuan and Zhejiang fritillary bulbs are the most common, and are sometimes used interchangeably. Most TCM texts do not distinguish between them, as they have similar functions.

There are four main species of Sichuan fritillary bulb that are native to East Asia and can easily be found on mountain slopes, in meadows and scrubs, and on stony moist hillsides on the mainland, and in Nepal and the Himalayas. On the mainland, they grow mainly in the provinces of Sichuan, Yunnan and Gansu.

Sichuan fritillary bulb (below) is useful for expelling sputum, moistening the lungs and suppressing coughs. In general it is used with other herbs to combat various ailments.

A cough with yellowish sputum indicates the lungs are also irritated by excessive heat. Herbs such as mulberry leaf, apricot seed and platycodon root can work together with fritillary bulb to clear the two problems. For a dry cough with little sputum or a cough with blood-stained sputum, it should be combined with glehnia root, dwarf lily-turf tuber and anemarrhena rhizome.

Fritillaria and Trichosanthes Fruit Powder is a traditional herbal formula for moistening the lungs, clearing heat and regulating the chi, in which Sichuan fritillary bulb acts as the chief herb and platycodon root reinforces the actions of the fritillary bulb by encouraging the proper flow of lung chi. The formula can be used to treat chronic bronchitis with a persistent cough and scanty, difficult-to-expel sputum.

Apart from herbal formulas, Sichuan fritillary bulb is a common functional food for combating cold and dry weather. Many Chinese families use it in desserts.

Prepare nine grams of fritillary bulb and soak in water overnight; cut a Chinese pear in half, remove the core and put the fritillary bulb (crushed slightly) into the holes, double-steam it for about one hour and add rock sugar to taste. The preparation helps to relieve a dry cough and mouth or nasal dryness.

Sichuan fritillary bulb is also used in other oriental medicines for treating asthma and bronchial problems. Pharmacological studies involving rats have shown anti-asthmatic effects such as suppressing the production of histamine and cytokines that occur at the onset of an asthmatic attack.

No adverse reactions have been reported from the use of fritillary bulbs in humans, and the herb is considered safe when used properly. It is not, however, recommended for coughs with excessive clear and thin sputum.

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