

Expert consensus on the use of traditional Chinese medicine for the treatment of common symptoms of post-COVID-19 short-term condition

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Abstract

A proportion of patients who recovered from COVID-19 have ongoing, recurrent, or new symptoms with negative nucleic acid/antigen test results, which has become a new public health problem that needs to be concerned. Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) has shown its unique advantages in preventing, treating, and rehabilitating COVID-19. To further standardize clinician's clinical diagnosis and use of TCM for the treatment of common symptoms associated with COVID-19 infection following negative nucleic acid/antigen results, the front-line clinical experts were invited for discussion on the concepts, etiology, clinical manifestations of post-COVID-19 condition, and on treatment with TCM to form the consensus. Clinicians of TCM, Western medicine, or integration of both can use this consensus document for clinical practice and research purposes.

Keywords: Expert consensus, Post-COVID-19 short-term condition, Traditional Chinese medicine

Introduction

Currently, China's COVID-19 prevention and control focus has shifted from "preventing infection" to "preserving health and preventing serious illness"^[1]. Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) has played a crucial role in alleviating the symptoms of patients, preventing the development of serious illnesses, treating seriously ill patients, and promoting rehabilitation^[2]. However, clinical practice and epidemiological investigations have shown that many patients experience post-COVID-19 short-term symptoms after negative nucleic acid/antigen test results, such as fatigue, cough, shortness of breath, palpitations, insomnia, muscle pain, and loss of smell or taste^[3-5]. There is an urgent need to give full play to the advantages of TCM in post-COVID-19 rehabilitation.

The "Expert consensus on the use of TCM for the treatment of common symptoms of post-COVID-19

short-term condition" was proposed by the Chinese Association of Chinese Medicine and Tianjin University of Traditional Chinese Medicine with the objective of improving standardization of relative diagnoses and treatment actions, enhancing clinical efficacy, and guiding clinical practices. This document outlines the effectiveness, safety, practicality, and accessibility of recommended prescriptions and medicines.

Presented in this consensus document are the concepts, etiology, clinical manifestations, and the use of TCM for the treatment of common symptoms associated with COVID-19 infection following negative nucleic acid/antigen results. It applies to the clinical diagnosis and treatment of patients with TCM, whose COVID-19 infection has been diagnosed as mild or medium, and can be used as a reference for the implementation of managing symptoms developed by serious/critical patients after discharge from hospital. Clinicians of TCM, Western medicine, or integration of both can use this consensus document for clinical and research purposes.

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Concept of common symptoms of post-COVID-19 short-term condition

The clinical manifestations of COVID-19 in patients with mild/medium infection following a negative nucleic acid/antigen test, mainly include fatigue, shortness of breath, unproductive cough with scanty phlegm, thirst and dry throat, stomach stuffiness, poor appetite and loose stools, palpitations and insomnia, loss of smell and taste, spontaneous sweating and night sweats, drowsiness and forgetfulness. These symptoms occur primarily at 2 weeks to 3 months after infection.

According to TCM theory, an internal struggle occurs in the body between pathogenic factors and antipathogenic *qi* when epidemic toxins attack the exterior of the body. The antipathogenic *qi* overcomes the pathogenic factors, but the residual pathogens remain, causing dual

damage to antipathogenic *qi*. Owing to the damage to the lung and spleen and deficiency in healthy *qi* and *yin*, symptoms may include fatigue, lassitude, shortness of breath when moving, unproductive coughing with scanty phlegm, thirst, dry throat, spontaneous sweating, palpitations, and insomnia. The residual pathogens damage the spleen and obstruct the stomach, resulting in spleen deficiency and loss of transportation, causing stomach stuffiness, poor appetite, and loose stools. Obstruction of the orifices results in diminishing senses of smell and taste, as well as drowsiness and forgetfulness. The disease affects the lungs, spleen, and other *zang* organs, and its nature is characterized by a combination of deficiencies and excesses^[6-9].

Treatment

Relevant basis

The following documents were essential for implementing this consensus document, including *COVID-19 Diagnosis and Treatment Protocol (10th Edition on trial)*^[10] issued by the National Health Commission of China, *Guidelines for Integrated Traditional Chinese and Western Medicine rehabilitation during COVID-19 Recovery (1st Edition)*^[11] issued by China Association of Chinese Medicine and Chinese Association of Rehabilitation Medicine, *Guidelines of Traditional Chinese Medicine Interventions for COVID-19 Patients at Home*^[12] issued by Expert Committee on the Prevention and Control of Traditional Chinese Medicine Diseases of National Administration of Traditional Chinese Medicine, *Pharmacopoeia of the People's Republic of China (2020 Edition)*^[13]. It also referred to the recommended treatment protocols for COVID-19 infection and rehabilitation launched by multiple provinces, including *COVID-19 Treatment Protocol with Chinese Medicine in Tianjin*^[14], *Rehabilitation of COVID-19 patients in Hebei Province using an integrated Chinese and Western medicine approach*^[15], and *Rehabilitation Program for COVID-19 Infections with Chinese Medicine in Shanghai*^[16]. Contents of manifestations and prescription in this document also were compiled from several ancient books on TCM^[17-26].

General prescription

Symptom features: dual deficiency of *qi* and *yin*, spleen deficiency and loss of transportation, and residual pathogens.

Clinical manifestations: fatigue and lassitude, shortness of breath when moving, unproductive cough with scanty phlegm, throat discomfort, stomach stuffiness, poor appetite and loose stools, pale or red tongue with less fluid, thready and rapid pulse.

Treatment principles and method: to supplement *qi* and nourish *yin*, strengthen the spleen and harmonize the middle jiao, clear heat and eliminate dampness.

Recommended prescription: variations of Shengmai powder combined with Pingwei powder (Qingjin Yiqi formula).

Prescription medication composition: Ginseng Radix Et Rhizoma (Renshen), Ophiopogonis Radix (Maidong),

Schisandrae Chinensis Fructus (Wuweizi), Poria (Fuling), Pinelliae Rhizoma Praeparatum Cum Alumine (Qingbanxia), Bran-processed Atractylodis Rhizoma (Cangzhu), Citri Reticulatae Pericarpium (Chenpi), Bupleuri Radix (Chaihu), Cimicifugae Rhizoma (Shengma), Coicis Semen (Yiyiren), Scutellariae Radix (Huangqin), Scrophulariae Radix (Xuanshen), Phragmitis Rhizoma (Lugen), Verbenae Herba (Mabiancao), Lophatheri Herba (Danzhuye), and Glycyrrhizae Radix Et Rhizoma (Gancao).

Administration: prepare a decoction once a day and take it with warm water twice a day. The course of treatment lasts 14 d or according to the doctor's instructions.

Symptoms that are not included in the above list of clinical manifestations can be treated by following the steps below on symptomatic treatment.

Symptomatic treatment

Cough

Residual pathogens astringe the lungs

Clinical manifestations: cough, itchy throat, or sudden paroxysmal cough or choking cough in response to a peculiar smell or cold wind, occasional cough up phlegm, pale red or reddish tongue, thready pulse.

Treatment principles: to disperse lung and evil, transform phlegm, and relieve cough.

Recommended prescription: variations of Zhisou powder combined with Sangxing decoction.

Prescription medication composition: Schizonepetae Herba (Jingjie), Asteris Radix Et Rhizoma (Ziwan), Stemonae Radix (Baibu), Cynanchi Stauntonii Rhizoma Et Radix (Baiqian), Platycodonis Radix (Jiegeng), Mori Folium (Sangye), Armeniacae Semen Amarum (Kuxingren), Fritillariae Thunbergii Bulbus (Zhebeimu), Citri Reticulatae Pericarpium (Chenpi), Glycyrrhizae Radix Et Rhizoma Praeparata Cum Melle (Zhigancao).

Pattern-oriented variations: if the expectorated phlegm is sticky, add Citri Exocarpium Rubrum (Juhong), Semen Benincasae (Dongguazi) and Houltuyuniae Herba (Yuxingcao); if the throat itchiness is severe, add Arctii Fructus (Niubangzi), Belamcandae Rhizoma (Shegan) and Periostracum Cicadae (Chantui).

Depletion of lung yin

Clinical manifestations: dry cough, rapid and contracted cough, scanty and sticky phlegm, dry mouth and throat, tidal fever, night sweats, red tongue with little coating, thready and rapid pulse.

Treatment principles: to nourish *yin* and clear heat, moisten the lung, and relieve cough.

Recommended prescription: variations of Shashen Maidong decoction.

Prescription medication composition: Glehniae Radix (Beishashen), Polygonati Odorati Rhizoma (Yuzhu), Mori Folium (Sangye), Ophiopogonis Radix (Maidong), Trichosanthis Radix (Tianhuafen), Asteris Radix Et Rhizoma (Ziwan), Farfarae Flos (Kuandonghua), Eriobotryae Folium (Pipaye), Glycyrrhizae Radix Et Rhizoma (Gancao).

Pattern-oriented variations: add *Stellariae Radix* (Yinchaihu) and *Artemisiae Annuae Herba* (Qinghao) for severe tidal fever; add *Ostreae Concha Cruda* (Duanmuli) and *Fructus Tritici Levis* (Fuxiaomai) for night sweats.

Recommended Chinese patent medicine for cough were presented in Table 1.

Heart palpitations

Dual deficiency of qi and yin

Clinical manifestations: palpitations and fright, lassitude and shortness of breath, spontaneous sweating and night sweat, feverish sensations in palms, soles and chest, dry mouth and tongue, red tongue with little coating, thready pulse.

Treatment principles: to supplement *qi* and nourish *yin*, constrain sweating, and activate the pulse.

Recommended prescription: variations of Shengmai powder.

Prescription medication composition: *Ginseng Radix Et Rhizoma* (Renshen), *Ophiopogonis Radix* (Maidong), *Schisandrae Chinensis Fructus* (Wuweizi), *Ziziphi Spinosa Semen* (Suanzaoren), *Dens Draconis* (Longchi).

Pattern-oriented variations: if there is *yin* deficiency with heat, add *Artemisiae Annuae Herba* (Qinghao) and *Moutan Cortex* (Mudanpi); if sweating is obvious, add *Ostreae Concha Cruda* (Duanmuli) and *Fructus Tritici Levis* (Fuxiaomai).

Heart qi deficiency

Clinical manifestations: palpitations and shortness of breath, dizziness and blurred vision, tiredness and lassitude, pale red tongue, white tongue coating, weak and thready pulse, or knotted and intermittent pulse.

Treatment principles: to reinforce heart energy, nourish the heart, and calm the mind.

Recommended prescription: variations of Zhigancao decoction.

Prescription medication composition: *Glycyrrhizae Radix Et Rhizoma Praeparata Cum Melle* (Zhigancao), *Ginseng Radix Et Rhizoma* (Renshen), *Rehmanniae Radix* (Dihuang), *Cinnamomi Ramulus* (Guizhi), *Asini Corii Colla* (Ejiao), *Ophiopogonis Radix* (Maidong), *Polygalae Radix* (Yuanzhi), *Dens Draconis* (Longchi).

Pattern-oriented variations: for blood deficiency, add *Astragali Radix* (Huangqi) and *Angelicae Sinensis Radix* (Danggui); for blood stasis, add *Salviae Miltiorrhizae Radix Et Rhizoma* (Danshen) and *Chuanxiong Rhizoma* (Chuanxiong).

Recommended Chinese patent medicine for heart palpitations were presented in Table 1.

Insomnia

Heart deficiency disturbs the mind

Clinical manifestations: difficulty in falling asleep, feverish sensations in palms, soles and chest, spontaneous sweating and night sweat, palpitations with restlessness, red tongue with little coating, thready and rapid pulse.

Table 1.
Recommended Chinese patent medicine for other discomforts

Symptoms	Chinese patent medicine
Cough	Su Huang Zhike capsules For patients with yellow phlegm, use Zhike Chuanbei Pipa dropping pills, Jizhi syrup, Lianhua Qingke tablets, Xingbei Zhike granules, etc. For patients with viscous phlegm, use Juhong Huatan pills, Xuanfei Zhisou mixture, Juhong Tanke granules (liquid), Juhong pills (granules, tablets, capsules), etc. For patients with clear phlegm, use Tongxuan Lifei pills (granules, oral liquid), Xingsu Zhike granules (syrup), Ganmao Zhike granules (syrup), Yupingfeng granules, etc. For the treatment of cough with asthma, use Zhisou Dingchuan pills (tablets), Kechuanning, Xiaoyan Zhike tablets, Kesuting syrup, Runfei semifluid extract, Danlong oral liquid, etc.
Heart palpitations	For those who experience panic and heart problems when moving, use Shengmai drink (granules, capsules, tablets), Qishen Yiqi dropping pills, Qishen Buqi capsules, Shensong Yangxin capsules, Tongmai Yangxin pills, Yangxinshi tablets, Wenxin granules, Yangxin Dingji capsules, Shenqi oral liquid, Ludangshen oral liquid, Zhenyuan capsules, etc. For patients with chest tightness and purple tongue, use Fufang Danshen dropping pills (tablets), Guanxinling tablets, Guanxinjing tablets (capsules), Xinsuning capsules, etc.
Insomnia	For those who have feverish sensations in palms, soles, and chest, use Bailemian capsules, Tianwang Buxin bolus, etc. For those who have fatigue and palpitations, use Baizi Yangxin pills, Renshen Guipi pills, Zaoren Anshen capsules (granules, oral liquid), Anshen Bunao liquid, etc. For those who are irritable, use Jiawei Xiaoyao pills, Shugan Jiayu capsules, etc.
Decreased sense of smell and taste	For those with reduced sense of smell, use Sanfeng Tongqiao dropping pills, Tongqiao Biyan tablets (pills, granules), Xiangju capsules, Biyuan Tongqiao granules, etc. For those with reduced sense of taste, use Huoxiang Zhengqi capsules (pills, drink, oral liquid), Shenling Baizhu powder (tablets, oral liquid), Buzhong Yiqi pills (tablets), Xiangsha Lijun pills, etc.
Brain fog	For those with head heaviness and drowsiness, use Banxia Tianma pills, Niu Huang Qingxin pills, etc. For those with headache and purple tongue, use Yangxue Qingnao granules, Shunaoxin dropping pills, Yinxing Tongzhi dropping pills (granules, capsules, dispersible tablets), Yinxingye tablets (granules, capsules, dispersible tablets, dropping pills), etc. For those with pain in the lower back and knees, use Liuwei Dihuang pills (oral liquid, tablets, capsules), Jingui Shenqi pills (tablets), Bailing capsules, Jinshuibao capsules, etc.

Treatment principles: to reinforce the heart and calm the mind, nourish *yin* and clear heat.

Recommended prescription: variations of Suanzaoren decoction.

Prescription medication composition: Ziziphi Spinosae Semen (Suanzaoren), Anemarrhenae Rhizoma (Zhimu), Poria (Fuling), Chuanxiong Rhizoma (Chuanxiong), Moutan Cortex (Mudanpi), Glycyrrhizae Radix et Rhizoma (Gancao).

Pattern-oriented variations: for restlessness, add Albizziae Flos (Hehuanhua) and Gardeniae Fructus (Zhizi); for tidal fever and night sweating, add Ostreae Concha Cruda (Duanmuli) and Fructus Triticis Levis (Fuxiaomai); for sleepless nights, add Magnetite (Cishi) and Dens Draconis (Longchi).

Deficiency of the heart and spleen

Clinical manifestations: insomnia, sleep disturbed by dreams and light sleep, weariness and inappetence, dizziness and blurred vision, weakness of limbs, abdominal distension and loose stool, pale tongue with thin coating, thready and weak pulse.

Treatment principles: to supplement *qi*, tonify blood, strengthen the spleen, and nourish the heart.

Recommended prescription: variations of Guipi decoction.

Prescription medication composition: Ginseng Radix et Rhizoma (Renshen), Atractylodis Macrocephalae Rhizoma (Baizhu), Angelicae Sinensis Radix (Danggui), Poria (Fuling), Astragali Radix (Huangqi), Longan Arillus (Longyanrou), Polygalae Radix (Yuanzhi), Ziziphi Spinosae Semen (Suanzaoren), Citri Sarcodactylis Fructus (Foshou), Glycyrrhizae Radix et Rhizoma Praeparata Cum Melle (Zhigancao).

Pattern-oriented variations: for stomach stuffiness and poor appetite, add Pogostemonis Herba (Huoxiang), Pinellia Rhizoma (Banxia) and Citri Reticulatae Pericarpium (Chenpi).

Recommended Chinese patent medicine for insomnia were presented in Table 1.

Decreased sense of smell and taste

Residual pathogens create obstructions

Clinical manifestations: decreased sense of smell, rhinitis, chest stuffiness and shortness of breath, pale red tongue, thready pulse.

Treatment principles: to open and disperse the lungs.

Recommended prescription: variations of Xinyi powder.

Prescription medication composition: Magnoliae Flos (Xinyi), Menthae Haplocalycis Herba (Bohe), Ligustici Radices et Radix (Gaoben), Angelicae Dahuricae Radix (Baizhi), Cimicifugae Rhizoma (Shengma), Chuanxiong Rhizoma (Chuanxiong), Tetrapanax Medulla (Tongcao), Saposhnikoviae Radix (Fangfeng), Notopterygii Rhizoma et Radix (Qianghuo), Glycyrrhizae Radix et Rhizoma Praeparata Cum Melle (Zhigancao).

Pattern-oriented variations: for rhinitis and runny nose, add Schizonepetae Herba (Jingjie) and Xanthii Fructus (Cangerzi); for nasal xerosis, add Ophiopogonis Radix (Maidong), Lilium Bulbus (Baihe) and Chrysanthemi Flos (Juhua).

Spleen deficiency and dampness obstruction

Clinical manifestations: decreased sense of taste, weakness and lassitude, shallow breathing and laziness in speaking, poor appetite and loose stool, pale enlarged tongue, white greasy tongue coating, soft and slippery pulse.

Treatment principles: strengthen the spleen and eliminate dampness.

Recommended prescription: variations of Buhuanjin Zhengqi powder.

Prescription medication composition: Mangnoliae Officinalis Cortex (Houpo), Atractylodis Rhizoma (Cangzhu), Citri Reticulatae Pericarpium (Chenpi), Pinellia Rhizoma (Banxia), Pogostemonis Herba (Huoxiang), Tsaoko Fructus (Caoguo), Acori Tatarinowii Rhizoma (Shichangpu), Glycyrrhizae Radix et Rhizoma Praeparata Cum Melle (Zhigancao).

Pattern-oriented variations: for poor appetite, add Scorch-fried Three Immortals Compound (Jiaosanxian) and Pseudostellariae Radix (Taizishen); for abdominal distension and fullness, add Aucklandiae Radix (Muxiang) and Citri Sarcodactylis Fructus (Foshou).

Recommended Chinese patent medicine for decreased sense of smell and taste were presented in Table 1.

Brain fog

Dampness spreading upward

Clinical manifestations: head heaviness and drowsiness, dizziness, forgetfulness, chest stuffiness, inappetence and somnolence, pale enlarged tongue, white greasy tongue coating, wiry and slippery pulse.

Treatment principles: to strengthen the spleen and dry dampness, transform and resolve turbidity.

Recommended prescription: variations of Yiqi Congming decoction combined with Banxia Baizhu Tianma decoction.

Prescription medication composition: Astragali Radix (Huangqi), Paeoniae Radix Alba (Baishao), Phellodendri Chinensis Cortex (Huangbai), Cimicifugae Rhizoma (Shengma), Puerariae Lobatae Radix (Gegen), Vitis Fructus (Manjingzi), Pinellia Rhizoma (Banxia), Atractylodis Macrocephalae Rhizoma (Baizhu), Gastrodiae Rhizoma (Tianma), Glycyrrhizae Radix et Rhizoma Praeparata Cum Melle (Zhigancao).

Pattern-oriented variations: for dizziness and distending headache, add Angelicae Dahuricae Radix (Baizhi), Ligustici Rhizoma et Radix (Gaoben), and Acori Tatarinowii Rhizoma (Shichangpu); for stomach stuffiness and poor appetite, add Pogostemonis Herba (Huoxiang), Fructus Amomi Rotundus (Baidoukou), and Mangnolia Officinalis Cortex (Houpo).

Lack of nourishment to the brain collaterals

Clinical manifestations: forgetfulness, tinnitus, lack of attention, unresponsiveness, red tongue with scanty fluids, thready pulse.

Treatment principles: to supplement *qi*, replenish essence, induce resuscitation, and strengthen the brain.

Recommended prescription: variations of Kongsheng Zhenzhong pills combined with Kaixin powder.

Prescription medication composition: Polygalae Radix (Yuanzhi), Acori Tatarinowii Rhizoma (Shichangpu), Tortoise shell (Guiban), Os Draconis (Longgu), Ginseng Radix et Rhizoma (Renshen), Poria (Fuling), Angelicae Sinensis Radix (Danggui), Chuanxiong Rhizoma (Chuanxiong).

Pattern-oriented variations: for severe tinnitus, add Corni Fructus (Shanzhuyu), Uncariae Ramulus cum Umcis (Gouteng) and Margaritifera Concha (Zhenzhumu); for aches in the lower back and knees, add Eucommiae Cortex (Duzhong) and Rehmanniae Radix Praepapata (Shudihuang).

Recommended Chinese patent medicine for brain fog were presented in Table 1.

Cautions

- (1) It is recommended that the above Chinese medicine prescriptions be taken under the supervision of a physician.
- (2) The above recommended prescriptions are proprietary medicines, which should be used in accordance with the associated instructions; provinces and municipalities may make proprietary Chinese medicines in accordance with the accessibility of drugs.
- (3) Individuals with a reduced sense of smell may benefit from olfactory training by using scented sachets and essential oils.
- (4) Patients should consume a balanced diet and adequate meals; maintain a regular lifestyle and avoid excessive staying up; exercise in moderation and avoid strenuous exercise; regulate emotions and avoid excessive worrying-worry; adhere to safety measures, wear masks, wash hands regularly, and use adequately ventilated rooms.

Conflicts of interest statement

Junhua Zhang and Boli Zhang are editorial board members of this journal. None of the other authors declare any conflicts of interest.

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Author contributions

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Ethical approval of studies and informed consent

Not applicable.

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Data Availability

All data generated or analyzed during this study are included in this published article.

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