Chinese herbal medicines in the treatment of acute respiratory infections: a review of randomised and controlled clinical trials

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Authors' objectives
To review clinical trials of Chinese herbal medicines (CHMs) in the management of acute respiratory infections (ARIs).

Searching
outcome observed), intervention (experimental group, control group), outcome measures and analysis (baseline data compared, outcome compared, t or P value reported).

Methods of synthesis
How were the studies combined?
A narrative approach was used to summarise and synthesise study results.

How were differences between studies investigated?
Differences between the studies were discussed for each section (e.g. patient allocation, data analysis).

Results of the review
Twenty-seven studies fulfilled the inclusion criteria: ten studies involved upper respiratory tract infections (1991 participants) and seventeen involved lower respiratory tract infections (at least 2130 participants).

CHMs were reported to have a significantly higher effect rate in 15 of 22 studies. Generally, CHMs were reported to produce greater improvement in clinical symptoms and physical signs and a shorter hospital stay.

Five out of seven studies testing Maxingshigangton and all studies using Shuang Huang Lian reported better treatment effects on bronchiolitis and pneumonia.

Authors’ conclusions
Because the trial methodology of the studies was often inadequate or insufficiently documented, it is difficult to recommend the use of CHMs in ARIs. More rigorous evaluation of CHMs is needed, as they are becoming popular treatments in many countries.

CRD commentary
Overall the methodology of this review was adequate but compromised by the poor quality of the included studies. It addressed a clear review question and included appropriate inclusion/exclusion criteria. The literature search was adequate though no attempts were made to locate unpublished data leading to possible publication bias. The authors provided no information on how the studies were selected for the review or how quality was assessed. There was also no explanation of how they extracted data from the studies. Appropriate data was presented for individual studies but the specific type of CHM used was not reported. The authors draw suitable conclusions from their results and include good recommendations for further research.

Implications of the review for practice and research
Practice: The authors state that because the trial methodology of the studies was often inadequate or insufficiently documented, it is difficult to recommend the use of CHMs in ARIs.

Research: The authors state that their analysis indicates the need for more rigorous evaluation of CHMs, including descriptions of their derivation, preparation, standardisation, potency, safety and efficacy, if they are to meet modern Western criteria for use.

Bibliographic details

PubMedID
9887898
Original Paper URL

Indexing Status
Subject indexing assigned by NLM

MeSH
Acute Disease; Anti-Bacterial Agents /therapeutic use; Controlled Clinical Trials as Topic; Drugs, Chinese Herbal /therapeutic use; Humans; Randomized Controlled Trials as Topic; Respiratory Tract Infections /drug therapy

AccessionNumber
11999000087

Date bibliographic record published
31/05/2001

Date abstract record published
31/05/2001

Record Status
This is a critical abstract of a systematic review that meets the criteria for inclusion on DARE. Each critical abstract contains a brief summary of the review methods, results and conclusions followed by a detailed critical assessment on the reliability of the review and the conclusions drawn.