



It is a little patch of Chinese herbs that is believed to correct the body's internal balance and works best as the hottest days of the year descend on us. **Liu Zhihua** speaks to doctors and patients on why more are waiting in line for this summer panacea.

HU LINGXIANG / ASIA NEWS PHOTO

Patchwork solutions

It is a herbal patch named after the three hottest periods of the year according to the lunar calendar. *Sanfu* started on July 18 this year, and as each period lasts 10 days, it will span a period of 30 days. These patches have been used in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) since the earliest recorded times according to *Huangdi Neijing* (The Inner Canon of the Yellow Emperor), more than 2,000 years ago, the time-tested textbook for TCM practitioners. *Sanfu* patch treatment became extremely popular in the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) and enjoyed a revival in recent years as more patients turn to TCM treatment.

But its popularity this summer has caught even the professionals by surprise.

"We knew there would be a lot of demand for *sanfu* patches treatment, but we didn't expect the hospital to be filled to capacity," says Zhang Shu'nan, a TCM specialist of respiratory diseases at the China-Japan Friendship Hospital in Beijing.

"All the patches we prepared were used up the first day, and we have received calls from other hospitals looking for patches," Zhang says.

The treatment is based on the TCM principle of yin and yang, which believes the balance of both elements in the body is vital for good health.

When yang is lacking, chronic diseases attributed to a "cold nature", such as coughing, asthma, arthritis, dysmenorrhea and irregular menstruation will take place or get worse in winter.

Sanfu patches contain a paste of herbs that are "hot" in nature, and when applied to specific acupuncture points, they replenish the yang elements.

Rong Weihua, a businesswoman and mother of a 3-year-old girl in Shenzhen, Guangdong province, says she believes in TCM, and has been avoiding using Western medicine on her daughter, for fear of side effects.

The toddler had a severe cough last winter, and a TCM doctor Rong trusts told her that *sanfu* patches would be helpful to prevent such coughs this year.

As the treatment works only during *sanfu*, a period indicated by TCM when the acupuncture points in the body are most receptive to yang supplements from warm and pungent herbs, Rong had to wait until July 18 to get her daughter treated.

She arrived at about 9:30 am at the Shenzhen Children's Hospital, only to find a long line already waiting. When she finally got both of them seen and treated by 11:30 am, half the morning was gone.

Rong is happy with the patches. "Even if they are not as effective as the doctors say, at least they are harmless to health, because they are used externally."

In Chongqing, the demand for *sanfu* patches is no less. "People are extremely enthusiastic about *sanfu* patches this year," says Jin Xianchun, director of the TCM



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Medicinal patches are applied to varied acupuncture points to treat different diseases.

department at Xinqiao Hospital.

At the hospital, the use of the patches only picked up after 2008. Patients were skeptical when the consulting doctors recommended the treatment at first. Gradually, as the reputation grew, more and more asked for the patches.

But, Jin was emphatic that patients must be examined by TCM doctors before treatment. Different cold-nature diseases

require different herbs applied to different acupuncture points, Jin stresses.

Usually, patients need to get the patches applied on four to 10 acupressure points for three successive years during the *sanfu* period. Apparently, most patients have no problems with the yearly commitments, Jin says.

At Xinqiao Hospital, at least 500 people received the treatment this

year on July 18, he says.

The Pharmaceutical Factory of Capital Institute of Pediatrics is the only manufacturer appointed by the Beijing traditional Chinese medicine bureau and the Beijing drug administration to produce and distribute *sanfu* patches in Beijing.

Roughly 300 hospitals in the capital, including the China-Japan Friendship Hospital, have bought

AT A GLANCE

- *Sanfu* patches must be applied during the *sanfu*, the hottest days of each year.
- Before using the patches, one needs to be examined by a TCM doctor.
- People with skin diseases, pregnant women, and those who have too much yang energy in the body and feel hot easily, should not use the patches.
- On average, an adult needs to have *sanfu* patches on for six to eight hours each time, and children for one to two hours.
- If the skin itches, take off the patches.
- Some doctors suggest fasting from alcohol and tobacco while having the *sanfu* patches.

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1.5 million packages of the patches, enough to treat about 500,000 patients.

For a three-year treatment course, a patient may pay 270 yuan (\$42.36).

"Many hospitals called to increase the orders," says Liu Chenggui from the factory.

"There are also quite a few hospitals using patches they make themselves, so it is hard to estimate how many patients are using *sanfu* patches in Beijing."

Gao Wen, an editor with a publishing house in Beijing, says he has been suffering from rhinitis since 2009, and has failed to make any headway with Western drugs.

He went to the hospital during his noon break to get *sanfu* patches, and was surprised at the crowd.

"I just want to try and I don't have high expectations," Gao says. "People say TCM has no side effects."

However, the use of *sanfu* patches does have some side effects.

Application may lead to local skin irritations, which may result in an inflamed or hot skin, itchiness or allergic reactions, especially among children and those with sensitive skin.

Most experts stress that the components of the herbal paste and the application on acupuncture points vary according to specific needs, and it is best to seek a consultation with a qualified TCM doctor. The misuse of *sanfu* patches will cause undesirable health issues, experts warn.

"*Sanfu* patches are not a cure-all," notes Zhang Shu'nan, the TCM specialist. "They must be used under proper TCM instructions."

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SO HOT IT CAN KILL YOU

By LIU ZHIHUA

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Get out of the heat. Keep cool and stay alive. When the temperatures soar, the body can overheat to such an extent that it can no longer regulate its own temperature through perspiration and the evaporation of sweat, which lowers body temperatures.

That is when the body can suffer from heatstroke, which may lead to organ failure and death.

In the summer of 2010, Beijing-based consultant Qin Le was on a business trip to Fuzhou, Fujian province, when he suffered from a puzzling disease.

He was staying about 10 minutes from the office, so he chose to walk back for a break at noon, and then walk back to work — without any protection from the sweltering heat. Soon after, he suddenly suffered from a fever, profuse perspiration, dizziness and breathing difficulties. He dismissed the symptoms as that of a cold and self-medicated without seeing a doctor.

A week later, the symptoms got worse, and he also started having diarrhea.

When he went to a hospital, he was diagnosed with heat exhaustion, a heat-related illness that was precursor to heatstroke.

"Heatstroke is a medical emergency, and can be fatal if not treated promptly," says Gu Chengdong, vice-director with the Emergency Department of China-Japan Friendship Hospital in Beijing.

When the outdoor temperature is high, or when a person engages in strenuous physical activity in an over-heated environment, the body is unable to balance heat gain and heat loss through the normal course of evaporation of perspiration.

The internal temperature rises, causing symptoms, such as heat syncope (fainting), heat tetany (hyperventilation, breathing difficulties) and heat exhaustion (muscle weariness, nausea) and eventually, heatstroke.

Heatstroke usually happens when the body temperature reaches 40 C, and at that stage, cells are damaged, the central nervous system is harmed, the metabolism disrupted. It may also result in fatal organ failure, Gu notes.

"Kids, the elderly, outdoor workers, new mothers, and people with chronic diseases are high risk groups for heatstroke," says Liao Shaofang, director with the Emergency Room of Tsinghua University No 1 Hospital in Beijing.

"The human body cannot lower its temperature efficiently in a hot and humid environment. Some people refuse to use the air-conditioner and electric fans for fear of catching cold, or to save money. And yet, they exert themselves in the heat. It's very unwise," Liao says.

Liao quotes the example of a 17-year-old girl he failed to save in 2009.

The girl was a restaurant worker, and her job was to make steamed buns. She fainted suddenly during work, and when she was sent to Liao, her body temperature had soared to 42 C.

Although the medical team used ice sheets and life-support measures, she passed away from kidney and heart failure.

"There is almost no chance of recovery when heatstroke is so severe that it causes multi-organ failure," Liao says.

In recent years, as the authorities realize the fatal threats of heatstroke to outdoor workers, preventive measures have been put in place and outdoor workers suffering heatstroke have become more rare.

It is now the ordinary people who must be educated about the dangers of heatstroke, says Gu, the emergency doctor with China-Japan Friendship Hospital.

Liao, the specialist, says the majority of heatstroke patients at Tsinghua University No 1 Hospital are the elderly with low immunity, especially those with chronic diseases, new mothers who are in confinement indoors according to Chinese custom, and children who are in poor physical shape.

Although the hazards vary, heatstroke is actually easy to prevent, doctors say.

As long as one avoids staying in a hot and humid environment for a prolonged period, keep a light diet in summer, and drink slightly salted water after profuse perspiration, it can be avoided, Gu says.

Keep cool in summer. It may save your life.



WEN BAO / ASIA NEWS PHOTO

Tourists wear hats to protect themselves against the scorching sun in Beijing.