Herbs that Transform Phlegm and Stop Cough

Phlegm (痰 tán) is the pathological thickening of fluids.

Phlegm is a secondary pathogen. It is usually the result of one of four underlying causes:

1. **Spleen Deficiency** leads to fluid stasis and dampness, which can transform into phlegm
2. **Heat** thickens and congeals the normal fluids into phlegm
3. **Kidney Deficiency** leads to a disruption of normal fluid metabolism; the overflowing fluids congeal into phlegm
4. **Liver Qi Stagnation** slows the circulation of fluids in the body causing them to congeal into phlegm

“The Spleen is the source of phlegm; the Lung is the house of phlegm.”

Phlegm can be **substantial** or **insubstantial**.

**Substantial phlegm** is real and visible, such as with cough and congestion.

**Insubstantial phlegm** cannot be seen. For example, insubstantial phlegm blocking the Heart orifices can cause shen problems. When insubstantial phlegm creates blockage in the channels, there may be phlegm-nodules such a lipomas, goiter, scrofula, plum pit qi, etc.
Herbs that Transform Phlegm and Stop Cough

- **Herbs that Cool and Transform Phlegm-Heat** clear heat and eliminate phlegm, for cough with thick, yellow, sticky, difficult-to-expectorate sputum. They can also treat nodules (such as goiter and scrofula), and convulsions and seizures due to phlegm. These herbs tend to be cold and bitter, while some of them are sweet because they moisten the Lung to make phlegm thinner and easier to expectorate. Since heat tends to damage yin fluids, these herbs are often combined with herbs that tonify yin.

- **Herbs that Warm and Transform Cold Phlegm** warm the Lung and transform phlegm, for thin, copious, white or clear phlegm. These herbs are often combined with herbs that tonify the Spleen, warm the interior, or dry dampness.

- **Herbs that Stop Cough and Wheezing** redirect rebellious qi downward to relieve cough and wheezing. They ventilate the Lung, but they don’t necessarily have a direct action of transforming phlegm.

### Herbs that Transform Phlegm and Stop Cough

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<th>Warm and Transform Cold Phlegm</th>
<th>Stop Cough and Wheezing</th>
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<td>xìng rén</td>
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<tr>
<td>chuān bei mǔ</td>
<td>zhī tiān nán xìng</td>
<td>zī wǎn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>zhè bei mǔ</td>
<td>bái jiè zǐ</td>
<td>kuān dòng huā</td>
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<tr>
<td>guā lóu</td>
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<tr>
<td>zhú rú</td>
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<td>hǎi záo / kǔn bù</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>sàng bái pí</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Herbs that Cool and Transform Phlegm-Heat

Phlegm-heat is thick, yellow, scanty, and may contain blood. Dry-phlegm is a type of phlegm-heat that is chunky.

- **Phlegm in the Lung**: Cough, wheezing, stifling sensation in chest, pain in ribs
- **Phlegm in Stomach**: Nausea, vomiting, loss of appetite, epigastric distention
- **Phlegm in Channels**: Nodules, goiter, scrofula

Herbs in this category tend to be cold and bitter. Use caution with cold patterns or Spleen deficiency. Some of these herbs are drying and should not be used for cough due to yin deficiency.

18 Incompatible herbs:
- **Fu Zi** is incompatible with **Bei Mu, Zhi Ban Xia, Bai Ji, Gua Lou, and Bai Lian**
- **Gan Cao** is incompatible with **Da Ji, Gan Sui, Hai Zao, Yuan Hua**
Herbs that Cool and Transform Phlegm-Heat

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Taste:</th>
<th>• bitter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Temperature:</td>
<td>• cold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Channels:</td>
<td>• LU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main Action:</td>
<td>• Resolve phlegm-heat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other:</td>
<td>• These herbs also treat scrofula, goiter, and convulsions caused by phlegm-heat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Some of these herbs are sweet because they moisten the Lung and make phlegm thinner and easier to expectorate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Since phlegm-heat often damages the yin fluids, these herbs are commonly combined with herbs that tonify yin</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Herbs that Cool and Transform Phlegm-Heat

- qián hú
- chuān bei mǔ
- zhè bei mǔ
- guā lóu
- zhú rú
- hài zǎo / kūn bù
- jié gěng
qián hú
*peucedani radix*

- Temp: slightly cold
- Taste: bitter, acrid
- Channels: LU
- Dosage: 3-9 grams

1. transforms phlegm-heat
   - mild
   - esp. for thick phlegm in the Lung
2. expels wind-heat invasion

chuān beì mù
*fritillariae cirrhosae bulbus*

- Temp: slightly cold
- Taste: bitter, sweet
- Channels: HT, LU
- Dosage: 3-9 grams

1. transforms phlegm-heat
   - moistens Lung yin; esp. for cough due to yin deficiency
   - directs Heart fire downward; for stifling sensation and chest bi
2. dissipates nodules
   - for nodules due to phlegm-fire, e.g. nodules, sores, swellings, scrofula, breast abscess

Chuan Bei Mu and Zhe Bai Mu are paired herbs
Chuan Bei Mu can be powdered and sprinkled over steamed asian pair as a home remedy for stopping cough.
zhè beì mǔ
*fritillariae thunbergii bulbus*

**Temp:** cold  
**Taste:** bitter  
**Channels:** HT, LU  
**Dosage:** 3-9 grams

1. transforms phlegm-heat  
   • for cough due to Lung heat
2. dissipates nodules  
   • esp. for nodules in the neck  
   • scrofula, goiter, Lung abscess, breast abscess

Zhe Bei Mu is colder than Chuan Bei Mu.  
Chuan Bei Mu is sweet and moistening. Zhe Bei Mu is not sweet and does not moisten.  
Zhe Bei Mu is better and treating nodules

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guā lóu
*tricosanthis fructus*

**Temp:** cold  
**Taste:** sweet  
**Channels:** LI, LU, ST  
**Dosage:** 9-21 grams

1. clears Lung heat to transform phlegm  
   • makes phlegm thinner and easier to expectorate  
   • Gua Lou Pi is best for this
2. opens the chest to treat chest bi  
   • for stifling sensation, chest pain, chest pressure  
   • Quan Gua Lou is best for this
3. moistens Large Intestine to relieve constipation  
   • Gua Lou Ren is best for this

Quan Gua Lou/Gua Lou SH - entire fruit (9-21g)  
Gua Lou Pi - peel (6-12g)  
Gua Lou Ren - seed (9-15g)
zhú rú
*bambusae caulis in taeniam*

**Temp:** slightly cold  
**Taste:** sweet  
**Channels:** LU, ST, GB  
**Dosage:** 4.5-9 grams

1. transforms phlegm-heat  
   • esp. for phlegm due to Gallbladder and Stomach heat  
   • for acute sinusitis (bi yuan)

2. clears Stomach heat and stops vomiting  
   • for nausea, vomiting, morning sickness due to heat

Phlegm due to Gallbladder and Stomach heat is copious rather than scanty. It also causes shen problems such as insomnia, palpitation, irritability; or poor focus, poor concentration, and poor memory.

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hǎi zǎo / kūn bù
*sargassum / eckloniae thallus*

**Temp:** cold  
**Taste:** bitter, salty / salty  
**Channels:** LV, LI, ST, (LU)  
**Dosage:** 6–15 grams

1. reduces phlegm and softens hardness  
   • for insubstantial phlegm only  
   • for phlegm nodules such as goiter, scrofula  
   • for bulging (shan) disorders involving the scrotum and testicles

2. promotes urination to treat edema

Hai Zao and Kun Bu are seaweeds. They are salty.  
Hai Zao and Kun Bu are incompatible with Gan Cao.
**jié gěng**

*platycodi radix*

- **Temp:** neutral (slightly cold)
- **Taste:** bitter, acrid
- **Channels:** LU
- **Dosage:** 3–9 grams

1. disseminates Lung qi and transforms phlegm
   - for cough with phlegm due to heat or cold
   - vents Lung qi to stop cough
   - benefits throat; for throat pain or loss of voice

2. discharges pus
   - for Lung abscess or throat abscess (use internally)

Jie Geng is a Lung channel guiding herb. It can direct the actions of other herbs to the upper body. Bensky puts this herb in the next category, *Warm Herbs that Transform Cold-Phlegm*.

**pàng dà hǎi**

*sterculiae lynchnophorae semen*

- **Temp:** cold
- **Taste:** sweet
- **Channels:** LI, LU
- **Dosage:** 2-3 pieces

1. clears and disseminate Lung qi
   - for sore throat, hoarseness, and cough due to phlegm-heat
   - used alone as tea

2. moistens Large Intestine

3. vents rashes
   - used externally
## Summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Medicine</th>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Additional Effects</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>qian hu (peucedani radix)</td>
<td>transforms phlegm-heat</td>
<td>• expels wind-heat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chuan bei mu (fritillariae cirrhosae bulbous)</td>
<td>transforms phlegm-heat</td>
<td>• moistens LU (sweet)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>zhe bei mu (fritillariae thunbergii bulbous)</td>
<td>transforms phlegm-heat</td>
<td>• dissipates nodules</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gua lou (tricosanthis fructus)</td>
<td>transforms phlegm-heat</td>
<td>• makes phlegm thinner and easier to expectorate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>zhu ru (bambusae caulis in taeniam)</td>
<td>transforms phlegm-heat</td>
<td>• opens chest, moistens L1 (Gua Lou Ren)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hai zao/kun bu (sargassum / eckloniae thallus)</td>
<td>transforms insubstantial phlegm</td>
<td>• rebellious ST qi due to heat, for nodules, goiter, scrofula</td>
</tr>
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