



Factsheet: Eczema and Psoriasis

About Eczema and Psoriasis

Eczema is an inflammation of the skin which may cause dryness, flakiness, heat and itching. It is sometimes referred to as dermatitis, which simply means an inflammation of the skin. Eczema can be caused by a number of different factors, and may result in just a small patch of skin being affected or sometimes larger areas. It can affect skin anywhere on the body.

Eczema and contact dermatitis are very common skin conditions affecting 5.8 million people. Eczema often occurs during infancy and the early childhood years. In most cases the symptoms will decrease, and usually disappear by about the age of six. Although 90% of child sufferers grow out of it by the age of 12, eczema is common in adults and tends to be recurrent.

Many things cause eczema. The most common cause is a general allergic over-sensitivity (atopy). This sort of eczema is known as atopic eczema, and it is linked with asthma and hay fever. Approximately 30 percent of those with eczema have asthma, and up to 60 percent experience allergic rhinitis. Whatever the causes of eczema, it usually leads to itching and redness, and may make the skin dry and flaky. Sometimes itchy blisters form. In the most common form of eczema (atopic eczema), the problem is often worst in the folds of the skin where the limbs bend.

Psoriasis is a common, chronic skin disease that derives its name from the Greek word for "itch". It most noticeably affects the skin, particularly around the face, scalp, elbows, knees, palms and soles of feet. The skin becomes inflamed, producing red, thickened areas with silvery scales, most often on the scalp, elbows, knees, and lower back. It is often itchy and may cause painful drying, cracking or blistering of the skin. Psoriasis affecting the joints can cause pain and make movement more difficult.

Most people with psoriasis develop it in their 20s, but the disease can occur at any age, even childhood. It is equally common in men and women, and tends to run in families. Psoriasis comes in many forms, each of which differs in severity, duration, location, and in the shape and pattern of the scales. In some cases, psoriasis is so mild that people don't know they have it. At the opposite extreme, severe psoriasis may cover large areas of the body. Arthritis can also stem from psoriasis; up to 30 percent of people with psoriasis may have symptoms of arthritis and 5 - 10 percent may have some functional disability from arthritis of various joints. In some people, the arthritis is worse when the skin is very involved. Sometimes the arthritis improves when the condition of the patients skin improves.

The cause of psoriasis is still not clear although it is believed to be a hereditary skin condition, triggered by infection, psychogenic factors or stress, trauma and infection. Recent discoveries in the causes of psoriasis point to an abnormality in the functioning of key white cells in the blood stream triggering inflammation in the skin. Because of the inflammation, the skin sheds too rapidly, every three to four days.

Western Medicine View

Eczema is mostly caused by a sensitivity of the skin and there are a number of approaches which help to minimise the symptoms. Blood tests, patch tests and other allergy tests can determine what causes the eczema to flare up. Emollient creams, ointments and shower and bath oils help to replenish the skin's natural protective oils. Some of the creams and oils contain an antiseptic, as it has been found that eczema often flares up as a result of a germ infecting the skin. Antihistamines taken by mouth may be helpful in reducing the itch. Antibiotics are usually prescribed if the skin becomes obviously infected. Ultra-violet light treatment (UVB and PUVA) can be used in the treatment of atopic eczema. Ultra-violet therapy potentially increases the risks of skin cancer, so it is only used in severe cases.

Conventional treatment mainly involves the application of topical steroids, which are very effective at reducing inflammation and itching. They can have serious side effects however, such as irreversible skin thinning, adrenal suppression and stunting of growth in children. There are different strengths of steroid applications, and the tendency is to use the lowest strength that the skin requires at the time very sparingly, in order to minimise the risk of possible side effects of using steroids.

Evening primrose oil supplements are used for eczema, and are a safe treatment, but have not consistently proved to be effective in research trials. It would appear that the evidence may not support them being any more effective than capsules or medicine containing no active ingredient.

Western medical treatment for psoriasis is based on the patient's health, age, lifestyle, and the severity of the condition. A specialised type of white blood cell (T-cell) has been identified as playing a key role in the inflammation that eventually leads to psoriasis plaques and related symptoms. Different types of treatments may be needed over a period of time, but the main aim of treatment is to reduce inflammation and to control shedding of the skin. It is common for treatment to be unsuccessful however.

Conventional treatment normally involves the use of long-wave ultraviolet light (UVA) and the application of topical preparations such as coal tar and ointments containing corticosteroids. Sunlight and ultraviolet light slow the rapid growth of skin cells. Sunlight exposure helps the majority of people with psoriasis but it must be used cautiously.

Moisturizing creams and lotions loosen scales and help control itching. Cortisone creams, ointments, and lotions may clear the skin temporarily and control the condition in many patients. Stopping these medications suddenly may result in a flare-up of the disease. After many months of treatment, the psoriasis may become resistant to the steroid preparations. In general, special diets have not been successful in treating psoriasis, except in isolated cases. However, some people find that avoiding spicy food, seafood, red meat and alcohol can help to reduce flare ups of the condition.

Chinese Medicine View

According to Chinese medicine theory, any skin disorder is the result of an imbalance within the body. Eczema is a skin condition associated with the functioning of the Lung, Stomach, Heart and blood. There are many different syndromes that can cause eczema. If the skin is weeping and hot, the cause is likely to be damp heat. Dryness and redness indicate heat in the blood, while itchiness is usually attributed to invasive wind. In addition, Chinese medicine, like Western medicine, also recognises insects as a cause for eczema, as well as other sources of allergy, such as food, chemicals, and animal hair.

There are many different psoriasis syndrome types as well. If the skin is itchy and red, the cause is usually wind and heat. Thick and purplish patches are due to blood stasis. Heat and damp are indicated by red, weeping patches. If the patient feels tired easily and the patches are thick, pale and dry, this is often due to a deficiency of blood and Qi.

According to Chinese Medicine theory, acupuncture and Chinese herbs can be prescribed to treat eczema and psoriasis. Treatment is mainly herbal. It can be either internal (herbal infusion to drink) or external (herbs to wash with or a herbal cream to apply on the skin) or both. Psoriasis is often slow in response to treatment, although some symptoms, such as the itching, may improve quickly in a short period of time. The length of treatment varies from person to person and it is normally recommend for patients to stay on treatment for a minimum of 12 weeks.

Evidence for Treatment with Acupuncture

Acupuncture has been shown to have a therapeutic effect on itching (pruritus) according to the World Health Organisation. However, there are very few published randomised controlled trials (RCTs) of the effects of acupuncture in the treatment of chronic inflammatory skin conditions and virtually none on the effects of herbal medicine. Most RCTs are very small or involve sham acupuncture, so more high quality trials are needed to evaluate treatment efficacy.

Two RCTs found that acupuncture reduced itching in patients with atopic eczema. On the other hand, a small RCT of acupuncture for psoriasis concluded that classical acupuncture was not superior to sham acupuncture. It is important to consider that sham interventions are not inactive placebos, but effectively different versions of acupuncture, so their value in evaluating treatment efficacy is highly questionable.

Acupuncture may help to relieve the symptoms of eczema and psoriasis by reducing inflammation, increasing local microcirculation to disperse swelling and modulating the number and ratio of immune cell types and regulating mediators of an allergic reaction. Acupuncture can also stimulate the nervous system, causing the release of neuro-chemical

messenger molecules and influence the body's homeostatic mechanisms. Stimulating certain acupuncture points can affect areas of the brain that are known to reduce sensitivity to pain and stress.

Clinical Trials and Articles

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Rao, YQ and Han, NY (2006), 'Therapeutic effect of acupuncture on allergic rhinitis and its effects on immunologic function', *Zhongguo Zhenjiu (Chinese Acupuncture and Moxibustion)*, 26(8): 557 – 560 [in Chinese]

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This factsheet will continue to be updated with new clinical trials and articles as they become available.