

HEALTH

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TCM: ease that eczema

Eczema, or atopic dermatitis, covers a broad range of allergic skin conditions. It is most often seen in infants and children whose family members also tend to develop asthma and hay fever. It often looks unpleasant, but is not contagious or life-threatening.

There are many causes of eczema like allergens in the environment which are not harmful to everyone. It can be brought on by irritants such as chemicals and detergents. Stress and other emotional problems can worsen these skin conditions. Eczema typically exhibits a flare-up and subsiding pattern that leads to many forms of skin lesions.

Acute eczema is characterised by red patches, blisters, swelling and crusting. The skin lesions are hot, intensely itchy, likely to be widely

distributed and leak fluid. TCM believes that this stage is mainly due to wind, dampness and heat pathogens. For obvious skin lesions with swelling and oozing, sopora root, long yam or belvedere fruit are used to expel the dominating dampness. For lesions with intense red, painful and burning sensation, dyers woad leaf, dandelion or forsythia capsule are used to expel the dominating heat. When there is extreme itchiness, silkworm and dictamnus root bark expel the wind and arrest itchiness.

Chronic eczema has localised lesions which are brown-grey with a thickened, raw, oozing surface. There may also be cracks and stretch marks. TCM believes that this stage is mainly due to blood deficiency, or blood and *chi* stagnation that leads to malnourishment of the

skin. Fresh rhemannia root and white peony root are used to replenish the blood; astragalus and red sage roots are for blood and *chi* circulation; large-leaved gentian and caltrop soothe itchiness. Skin rashes can appear on any part of the body, and it is important to select the suitable herbs and treatments. Sichuan lovage and notopterygium root focus on the head and face; virgate wormwood herb and plantain seeds focus on the breast and navel.

TCM believes that "dampness" is the main concern for flare-ups and stubborn cases of eczema. A proper living environment is important, especially avoiding extreme hot and moisture. An easily digestible, bland diet helps keep the body dry. Beware of alcohol, coffee, spices, roasted and fried foods which can

promote the accumulation of internal pathogens. During flare-ups, mung beans, rice beans, hyacinth beans, coix seed, poria, water chestnuts, celery, chrysanthemum and melons can help the body cleanse itself. For a cooling solution try dandelion (20g), Chinese gentian root (20g) and wild chrysanthemum (20g). Prepare for wet dressings for acute eczema, and change the dressing every two to three hours, four to six times a day. This should relieve the inflammation and effusion within two days.

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Rose Tse and Jenny Eagleton are with Integrated Chinese Medicine Holdings (icm.com.hk). Before taking any medicine, consult your TCM or medical practitioner