

Eczema and Psoriasis

Eczema

Eczema is a form of dermatitis or skin inflammation, which shows patches of dry flaky skin; it is often itchy and can sometimes weep. There are many different types of eczema and there are many possible causes. There is evidence to suggest that eczema may be linked to food allergies, most commonly dairy products. The two main types of eczema are contact eczema (or contact dermatitis) and atopic eczema. Contact eczema develops when the skin is sensitive to particular irritants, for example wool, metals, make-up, detergents or sunlight. Atopic eczema often affects people with a family history of asthma and hayfever; it is common in children and fortunately many people do eventually grow out of it.

To treat this skin condition successfully, potential skin irritants or allergies need to be identified. A healthy diet is essential for skin health, and lifestyle factors may also need to be addressed, for example stress is known to make the condition worse.

Psoriasis

Psoriasis is a chronic skin condition which often runs in families and is characterised by itchy, scaly pink patches commonly appearing on the elbows, knees, shins and scalp, while the fingernails and toenails may also be affected. It is difficult to know what causes psoriasis, but a combination of a healthy diet and appropriate skin ointments enables most sufferers to keep their symptoms under control. There is some evidence to support the theory that impaired ability to neutralise and excrete dietary toxins via the liver may contribute to the condition. Traditionally, Naturopathic therapies have emphasised liver health in dealing with psoriasis; for this reason it is also recommended that sufferers avoid alcohol.

Diet

Health is undeniably more than skin deep, and no creams or lotions will solve skin problems unless your diet is providing your skin with the nutrients it needs for repair and renewal. A diet high in unprocessed and unrefined foods such as fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains and pulses will provide a balanced intake of essential vitamins and minerals. Things to avoid include coffee, sugars, nicotine, and highly processed foods containing artificial additives. Animal fats, including red meat, should be kept to a minimum, as these tend to exacerbate all skin problems.

Coffee - there are many different chemicals in coffee, apart from caffeine, and none of them are good for your skin. A good coffee substitute is roasted dandelion root which is pleasant tasting and can be beneficial to the skin,

since it helps to maintain the health of the liver, and a healthy liver is essential for a clear skin. Roasted dandelion root would be a suitable alternative.

Alcohol - reducing alcohol intake can be beneficial to the skin. Alcohol widens the blood vessels and increases the blood flow to the skin, causing it to become reddened and warm, which exacerbates itchy and flaky skin conditions. Alcohol can also adversely affect liver function.

Gamma Linolenic Acid (GLA - found in Evening Primrose and Borage oils) and Eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA - found in fish oils) are sometimes used in the treatment of both eczema and psoriasis. These fatty acids have an anti-inflammatory effect, and benefit a dry, inflamed skin condition. There are many natural sources of GLA and EPA including uncooked polyunsaturated vegetable oils, sunflower seeds, walnuts, almonds, avocados, and fish such as mackerel, salmon, herring and cod. If the diet is lacking in these foods, it may be beneficial to supplement your diet in order to ensure levels of these important nutrients and so help maintain the health of the skin. Evening primrose oil or Borage oil capsules are recommended for those who have suffered from eczema. Sufferers from psoriasis are often recommended to use Fish Oils containing omega-3 fatty acids.

Food Allergies

Some cases of eczema may be linked to a food allergy, and eliminating certain foods from the diet, usually wheat and dairy products, can greatly improve the condition. Before starting such a diet it is advisable to consult with a medical herbalist to ensure a well-balanced diet with no deficiencies in vitamins and minerals: this is particularly important with children. There may be other foods in the diet making the condition worse, and since all people are different, it is better to consult a qualified practitioner for more advice, and to establish an individual treatment plan.

Supplements

Ideally a good intake of essential nutrients can be obtained from your diet. However, if you have an acute skin condition, it is necessary to ensure that you do not have any nutritional deficiencies, and a supplement may be suggested.

An antioxidant combination is highly recommended, including the vitamins A,C,E and the minerals zinc and selenium. These nutrients are essential to skin health. Zinc and vitamin C are thought to be particularly beneficial. Foods rich in antioxidants include green leafy vegetables, carrots, beetroots, red and yellow peppers, strawberries, almonds and wheatgerm.

Other supplements, including Quercetin, may be recommended by a herbalist.

Lifestyle

Stress can play a large part in both psoriasis and eczema flare-ups, and a noticeable change in the skin can often be seen when stress management measures are adopted. See the leaflet on Stress Management for some suggestions on self-help techniques, or consult a Medical Herbalist for more advice.

In some cases of psoriasis, salt water as in sea swimming improves the condition of the skin. Dead Sea Salts rich in minerals can be added to bath water to simulate this during our British winter (or summer!).

Eczema sufferers can find benefit from an Oat Bath. A few handfuls of oats wrapped in a muslin cloth and added to your bath make the water softening and soothing to the skin, and can help to ease the itch.

Due to the sensitivity of the skin in both eczema and psoriasis, it is a good idea to use only unperfumed soaps, and a non-biological washing powder. Fabric conditioners should be avoided. Protect the skin from chemicals and detergent as much as possible, especially if a contact skin allergy is indicated. Chlorine in swimming pools and jacuzzis may be irritating.

Herbs

Herbs have been successfully used in skin conditions for centuries. Ideally, you should consult a qualified medical herbalist who can work out a specific prescription to suit your needs. Alternatively, we strongly recommend that you ask our Dispensary assistants for advice.

There is a long list of herbs traditionally used by those with skin problems. These would usually be taken internally, frequently as an infusion or tea, although creams and lotions also have an equally long history of use.

Internal Use

Some useful herbs include:

- *Sarsaparilla* – particularly helpful for psoriasis sufferers. Sarsaparilla aids proper functioning of the body which aids the correction of these skin conditions. A cleansing and detoxifying herb. Combines well with Burdock and Yellow dock.
- *Yellow dock* – has a long history of use in treating chronic skin complaints, and has proved very useful in the treatment of psoriasis. Yellow dock also helps to improve the digestion and tone of the bowel often indicated in chronic skin conditions.
- *Burdock* – probably the most valuable remedy in treating skin problems, burdock has a bitter action aiding detoxification of the body and cleansing the blood. Very useful in the treatment of psoriasis and acne.
- *Chamomile* - An important remedy when treating eczema. Anti-

inflammatory, soothing and healing, chamomile also helps with anxiety and tension. Combines best with *nettle* and *plantain*.

- *Plantain* – is strengthening and cooling to the skin especially in the treatment of eczema where the skin can often appear thin and broken
- *Nettle* – a natural anti-histamine effect beneficial in treating allergies. It is particularly good where there is itch and irritation.

External Use:

Usually based on *chamomile*, *chickweed*, *starflower* and *calendula*, they often contain the essential oils of lavender and peppermint.

Use a cream or lotion containing:

- *Starflower* – a soothing, healing, anti-inflammatory action, good for the skin. Starflower is very moisturising and is used in the treatment of eczema, psoriasis or dermatitis.
- *Chickweed* – Chickweed is an ancient English remedy for skin conditions. It has a 'refrigerant'/cooling action on the skin expelling excess body heat, making this prolific garden weed an excellent remedy for hot, itchy skin.
- *Chamomile* – Chamomile reduces redness and inflammation of itchy skin conditions, and combined with the cooling action of peppermint, is an excellent combination for eczema.
- *Pokeroot* – used externally reduces the redness and scaling so often associated with psoriasis. Best used as an ointment to prevent loss of moisture from the skin.
- *Marigold* – Marigold, when used externally, heals broken skin and hacks. Its antiseptic action also helps to prevent infection. For use with eczema, hacks, wounds and dermatitis.

Caution

Patients with skin problems have often been long-term users of steroid creams. If you are thinking about trying a herbal cream instead, you should cut out the steroid cream very slowly. Mix it with a herbal cream at the beginning and gradually, over time, reduce the percentage of steroid used. Stopping use of steroid creams too quickly can sometimes cause the skin to flare-up. If you are in any doubt, consult your doctor or medical herbalist.

As with all health problems, we strongly recommend that you consult a qualified medical herbalist to create a specific prescription and treatment plan to meet your individual needs.

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