



The Treatment of Eczema

with TCM

Dr. Maryam Mahanian, Dr.TCM

Eczema: Making a Difference

I remember one of my first eczema patients back in 2003. I was quite fresh out of school. The patient was a forty year old female with severe facial eczema. It was extremely uncomfortable even to just smile or speak. The itchiness would be overwhelming and would often keep her awake at night. Her face was bright red, hot, and swollen. She was exhausted and beyond frustrated. As a result of the physical appearance of the eczema, it took a great toll on her self-esteem. My heart broke for this patient. I knew that I had to do whatever I could to help her. I couldn't help but feel that my knowledge and experience to treat such a severe case was inadequate. I had to go beyond what I learnt in school and further deepen my knowledge on eczema.

Eczema refers to a group of diseases such as atopic dermatitis, contact dermatitis (allergic or irritant), and seborrheic dermatitis. I will focus on the most common type which is atopic dermatitis. Atopic Dermatitis usually begins in infancy and can recur later in life.

ETIOLOGY

Constitutional Spleen deficiency results in the non-movement and non-transformation of fluids, which collect into Dampness. It is said in the Nei-Jing that defensive Qi exits from the middle burner meaning that it is manufactured by the Spleen. Insufficient defensive Qi makes one more susceptible to being invaded by Exterior-Wind evils. A poor diet engenders Dampness. This Dampness obstructs the free flow of Qi resulting in Heat. Wind, Damp, and/or Heat get trapped in the skin causing symptoms of dermatitis. Over time, injury to the Fluids results causing Blood deficiency and Dryness.

Dermatitis is often exacerbated by unfulfilled desires and easy anger. This results in Liver Qi stagnation.

Liver Qi stagnation may assail the Spleen leading to deficiency of Blood. Liver Qi stagnation also results in Heat. The Liver stores the Blood so the Heat easily transfers to the Blood aspect.

Heat floats upward to accumulate in and steam the Lungs. The Lungs govern the skin. The reason why eczema often affects the upper body is due to the upward moving nature of Heat.

Over time, malnourishment and obstruction by Wind, Dampness, and Heat impede the free flow of Qi and Blood leading to Blood stasis. This makes the condition more stubborn and the lesions take longer to heal.

PATTERN DIFFERENTIATION

Theoretically, eczema can be broken down into the very simple patterns of Wind-Heat, Damp-Heat, or Wind-Dryness. Unfortunately, in practice it is not this simple. Patients often have a combination of the above patterns and it is imperative that the diagnosis be accurate.

The good and bad news: The bad news is that dermatological conditions can be difficult and slow to respond to treatment. It can take much time and patience on the part of both the patient and the practitioner. The good news is that it is relatively easy to identify the patterns. When creating a differential diagnosis, first and foremost, you must look at the lesions. Mazin Al-Khafaji, a leader in TCM dermatology, writes in his article titled *The Wind of the Four Crooks*, "the skin is like an open book, the vast majority of information is there to be deciphered by those who can read the language. By closely observing the morphology, a formula will almost write itself."¹

As a general rule, if there is redness, there is Heat. If the colour is purple-red, there are Heat toxins or stasis-Heat. If dark-red, there is stasis Heat. If there are blisters, there is Dampness. If there is pus, there are Heat toxins. If scaling, there is Dryness. If skin is pigmented (brown) with lichenification, there is Blood Stasis. If itching, there is Wind. If the lesion feels hot, there is Heat. If there is localized pain there is Blood Stasis. Add up the proportions and you will figure out how much of each herb to use in the formula. Also, keep in mind that you can have Dry and Damp at the same time (scaling and suppuration). It goes without saying that a complete patient history should always be considered in addition to looking at the lesions.

Itchiness is the universal symptom for eczema and

can be the most difficult symptom to live with. Wind and/or Dampness are the main culprits for itchiness. The practitioner needs to figure out if there is Wind, Dampness, or, if a combination of the two which one predominates. Itchiness is often worse at night because the circulation of Qi and Blood slows down during the Yin hours.

In my practice, I prescribe most formulas in concentrated powder form (at a high dosage) but in some exceptional cases as in the one described above, I do prescribe raw herbs. A few of the common herbs I use are the following:

- *Stop itching due to Wind: Bai Ji Li, She Chuang Zi*
- *Stop itching due to Dampness: Bai Xian Pi*
- *Blood mover: Dan Shen*
- *Cooling the Blood: Chi Shao Yao, Sheng Di Huang, Mu Dan Pi*
- *Clearing Damp-Heat: Long Dan Cao*
- *Dampness seeping: Fu Ling, Ze Xie, Che Qian Zi*

I am cautious when prescribing nourishing herbs. I most often treat excesses in my eczema patients, ie: Damp-Heat, Wind-Heat or Toxic-heat. I usually add nourishing herbs in small doses towards the end of the TCM treatment.

Acupuncture can be an effective complement to the herbal medicine in the treatment of eczema. Some of its benefits for eczema patients are calming the nervous system, soothing Liver Qi and relieving Blood stagnation, and helping patients sleep better.

DIETARY RECOMMENDATIONS

Changing one's diet dramatically can often be a burden and too overwhelming on these already stressed out eczema patients. I recommend minor adjustments such as avoiding spicy foods, alcohol, greasy foods, and shellfish, and incorporating soups and stews, congee and steamed vegetables in their diet. Eczema can also be due to insufficient Blood-nourishing foods in the diet. For example, some of my vegetarian patients have seen a positive difference after incorporating animal meats into their diet.

EXTERNAL REMEDIES

According to Bob Flaws, "Many failures in the Chinese medical treatment of dermatological conditions are due to failure to apply the correct external remedy."² External remedies should be applied two to three

times per day for best results. A long standing TCM doctor, Dr. Tran, introduced me to herbal foot soaks to bring fire downwards which I used for the above patient. I also commonly use external remedies from the Bluepoppy line. The eighteenth century physician Xu Da-Chun observed in *Discussion of the Origin and Development of Medicine*, that "External diseases emphasize external (treatment) methods the most."

Other lifestyle recommendations are to rest, refrain from overworking, and try to deal with stress and stay happy.

Nutritional supplements can be helpful but taking too many vitamins can be warming in nature. I always advise moderation. A few supplements to choose from are B complex, Fish oils, Quercetin, Zinc, and most importantly a good quality probiotic.

After working with the above patient for many months, her eczema improved dramatically. I just recently saw her again after more than a decade, and she reported that her facial eczema has not returned.

- *Maryam Mahanian*

References:

¹ Mazin Al-Khafaji, *Wind of the Four Crooks*

² Bob Flaws (Blue poppy Institute): *Successful Treatment of Eczema* course



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Maryam Mahanian is a registered doctor of TCM. Her private practice in North Vancouver BC focuses on infertility, pregnancy, women's health, skin disorders, and cosmetic acupuncture. When she is not seeing patients, she is trying to keep up with her energetic two children.

Website: chinesemedicineclinic.com