

ECZEMA

Improving skin health in both adults and children alike

Eczema is commonly described as a superficial inflammation of the skin. It is characterized by vesicles (when acute), redness, edema, oozing, crusting, scaling and usually itching. It can cause quite a bit of discomfort for the sufferer visually but also physically as it can become quite sore, cracked, red and itchy at times. Eczema is often referred to as dermatitis and although there are subtle differences between the sub categories of dermatitis and eczema from a naturopathic perspective this information is not essential in terms of our approach to treatment. What is more important is classifying whether the cause is an internal or endogenous one, as opposed to an external or exogenous cause.

Exogenous causes for eczema and dermatitis (often known as contact dermatitis) include industrial solvents, dyes, nickel and other metals, some soaps and detergents and leather tanning chemicals. In such cases avoiding the problem chemical is often enough to resolve the condition. If the eczema is stemming from internal origins, the treatment becomes a lot more in depth and investigative work to identify the trigger is often required. In such cases eczema is the final result of a complex series of internal reactions to exposure to such allergens and irritants. It reflects an imbalance in the bodies functioning and general health. Eczema although it can occur alone, often accompanies other allergic diseases such as hay fever and asthma.

A number of factors can irritate eczema although these triggers will vary from person to person. They include stress, mechanical irritation (damage to the skin), heat, and diet such as milk and milk products, eggs, peanuts and wheat. Food triggers tend to be the most common causes in children. Bacterial infections are often responsible for perpetuating eczema as well. Approximately 80% of children with eczema show chronic colonization of the skin (living on the skin) with bacteria such as *S.aureus* and 50% of these were colonized with toxin-positive strains. These bacteria can be a cause of major immune stimulation via the toxins they release penetrating through a weakened skin barrier and entering the blood stream. This increased immune activation triggers certain cells within the body (called mast cells) to release chemicals which increase inflammation and perpetuate the itch-scratch cycle.

Different antigens in certain foods consumed on a regular basis can have a negative impact on the immune system and can increase inflammatory responses as well. Consuming such antigens on a regular basis can trigger constant inflammation in the digestive tract which in turn can lead to damage of the mucous membranes in the gut. Damage to the intestinal wall reduces its capacity to act as a barrier and things which reside in the gut (bacteria etc) or are there waiting elimination (waste products, toxins etc) can reabsorb through breaks and weakened areas of the gut into the bloodstream. Here they can wreak havoc with our immune system and nervous system, triggering inflammation and causing damage. Increased gut permeability (leaky gut) has been suggested as a pathogenic factor in food allergy as well. A large number of eczema patients are sensitive to certain foods such as cow's milk, eggs, some grains indicating a link between food allergies and atopic conditions including eczema and asthma. In approximately 40% of cases, removal of the problem food allergens leads to a significant improvement in their eczema.

An imbalance of the beneficial ('friendly' or 'good') and the 'bad' bacteria in the gut can also exacerbate eczema. A presence of a higher number of 'bad' bacteria can impact negatively on the immune system leading to a higher incidence of allergic inflammation. Supplementation with beneficial bacteria has been shown to improve atopic eczema and allergies in general as well as having a positive impact on digestive health. They have even shown a marked preventative effect, reducing the incidence of eczema in babies and children, when used in pregnancy and breastfeeding.

A good balance of friendly and unfriendly bacteria is also important for improving tolerance to foods and decreasing food allergies, as well as general digestive health. Beneficial gut flora improve oral tolerance, that is they help the immune system to not respond to normally benign foods, thus reducing inflammation from food allergens. Certain bad bacteria (such as e.coli and cholera toxin) have been shown to inhibit oral tolerance leading to an increase in food allergies. Adequate beneficial gut flora counteracts the bad bacteria, promoting and restoring oral tolerance. Therefore it becomes clear to see the beneficial role restoring digestive health and balance plays in the treatment and prevention of eczema. Addressing digestive health and restoring a healthy balance of good and bad bacteria is one of the fundamental approaches of our treatment for eczema. It is correcting the condition at the root of the cause, the gut, not just suppressing the presentation of the condition on the skin.

Other areas of significance include addressing the strength and health of the skin, removing and bacterial infection of the skin topically, correcting any contributing nutritional deficiencies and balancing the immune system. To be able to reduce inflammation in the body you need adequate levels of numerous different nutrients such as antioxidants, omega 3 fatty acids (good fats), and zinc to name a few. A deficiency of certain nutrients may lead to increased free radical damage, increased inflammation, poor general health, weakened skin integrity and a compromised immune system, all of which has the potential to lead to poor health and exacerbations of eczema in predisposed individuals.

Although it may appear overwhelming and complicated, a qualified practitioner will be able to guide you through a program, individually designed to address your individual needs or the needs of your child. Deficiencies of certain nutrients may vary greatly between people and thus there is no set "one size fits all" prescription for eczema. Although there are definitely some similarities between predisposing factors, treatment will vary between people and thus the help of someone qualified in nutrition should be sought. Addressing eczema naturally through correcting the causes and improving digestive health has benefits far beyond that of just improving eczema. Complementary medicine does not view any condition in isolation. Thus treatment for eczema is not isolated to just the skin. Your entire system needs to be taken into account and any areas of poor functioning improved. This can result in a desired improvement in your eczema of course but also an enhancement of your overall well being. Through addressing eczema in this way I have witnessed in some dramatic improvements in peoples eczema and quite often we have been able to successfully send the eczema into remission.