

Complementary therapies and eczema factsheet

Complementary therapies cover a range of healthcare approaches, practices and products that are not normally considered to be part of conventional medicine. The term 'complementary' embodies the principle that therapies should be used alongside, and not as an alternative to, conventional medicine and practices. Complementary therapies can help to control symptoms for certain conditions, improve a person's quality of life and enhance their general sense of well-being. If you are considering using a complementary therapy for eczema, or indeed any other condition, it is important that you discuss this first with your conventional healthcare professional in order to avoid any adverse effects or interactions with your current treatment plan.

General advice on using complementary therapies

Although complementary therapies can never be a cure for eczema (even if some people claim that they can be), some can be helpful when used alongside conventional treatments. However, what one person finds beneficial may not help another. Unfortunately, the evidence for the effectiveness of complementary therapies is often limited and inconclusive. This is not to say that complementary therapies cannot help people with eczema and certain other conditions – it's simply that more research is needed. It is also important to remember that because a product or therapy is 'natural', it is not necessarily suitable or safe (see precautions for individual therapies below). Always consult your healthcare professional before using complementary therapies.

The Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) is the government agency responsible for ensuring that medicines and medical devices meet acceptable quality, performance and safety standards. Legislation regarding the regulation of herbal practitioners and herbal medicine is highly complex and has been the subject of much parliamentary debate in recent years. Visit the MHRA website www.mhra.gov.uk for the latest information and advice.

Listed below are some of the most commonly used complementary therapies.

Western herbalism

Herbal medicine is commonly referred to as 'phytotherapy'. Herbalists believe that conditions like eczema develop when the body's natural health mechanisms have become unbalanced. Plant medicines are selected mainly to stimulate the immune system or strengthen the body's normal functions to help the body heal itself. Remember that lots of conventional medicines are plant-based too.

The herbalist will review your overall health as well as your eczema. Particular areas that will be addressed are inflammation, general immunity, the possible role of food allergens, and intestinal health.

Herbalists employ a number of strategies for tackling inflammatory conditions such as eczema. They can prepare a range of ointments and lotions tailored to the individual.

We strongly advise that you patch test any new cream on a small area of skin that is unaffected by eczema. The area to test is generally the inner arm just below the elbow joint. It is important to do this once daily for five consecutive days as sensitisation often takes a while to develop.

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Herbal remedies can have powerful side effects. The MHRA website provides a list of herbal ingredients that are prohibited or restricted in medicines. Western herbal tablets and creams are generally screened in order to reduce the risk of toxicity; these are available in pharmacies and health-food stores. Since 1 May 2014, all herbal medicinal products sold in the UK that fall under Directive 2004/24/EC require either a full marketing authorisation (MA) or a traditional herbal registration (THR) in order to remain on the market. These are listed on the MHRA website and are considered safe so long as you have checked with your doctor that they will not interfere with any conventional treatments you are using.

You should exercise extreme caution with creams that come from other parts of the world (often available on the internet and on market stalls) as some have been found to contain topical steroids of varying potencies, including Dermovate, which is very potent (50 times stronger than Hydrocortisone 1%). Potent steroids have been found in Wau Wa cream, OSAS (an intensive body lotion with aloe vera) and Chinese herbal creams (see below).

Chinese herbal medicine

Chinese herbal medicine is a part of traditional Chinese medicine. In accordance with traditional Chinese diagnosis, the herbalist will prescribe an individualised herbal selection in the form of tinctures, extracts, infusions, decoctions or creams.

There is some research evidence of efficacy for Chinese herbal preparations. However, there have also been reported cases of topical steroids in creams, and liver and kidney damage resulting from Chinese herbal medicine. Therefore we recommend that if you wish to take this approach, you should do your research carefully before choosing a practitioner, and always ask for a list of the ingredients that have been prescribed for you. You should always talk to your GP before you try Chinese herbal medicine, as you will need to have regular blood tests to keep a check on your liver and kidneys.

Homeopathy

Homeopathy involves treating a person with highly diluted substances with the aim of triggering the body's

natural system of healing and raising general levels of health. Based on symptoms, the homeopath will match the most appropriate medicine(s) to each patient.

Despite the popularity of homeopathy, investigations into its effectiveness have found there is no good quality evidence that it is useful in treating any health condition. A 2010 House of Commons Science and Technology Committee report concluded that homeopathy is no more effective than a placebo, and the principles behind it are 'scientifically implausible'.

Aromatherapy

Aromatherapy uses concentrated, volatile plant extracts (essential oils and hydrosols) and vegetable oils for their therapeutic properties. Some people may find that anti-inflammatory oils help their skin and that the activation of a different sensory pathway (smell) distracts them from scratching and promotes a sense of calm and well-being.

Many people with eczema are sensitive to fragrance (including airborne fragrance, e.g. in a candle or diffuser) and cannot tolerate aromatherapy oils in any form. If you wish to use essential oils for massage or bathing, make sure you patch test them on your inner arm, just below your elbow joint, for five consecutive days, in case your skin has an adverse reaction. Do not use on broken skin.

Commonly, aromatherapy oils are applied via massage, but this is often inappropriate for people with eczema, especially during an acute flare-up. Massaging inflamed or broken skin is not recommended because of the risk of spreading infection and aggravating inflammation. Please note that olive oil is no longer recommended as a carrier oil for aromatherapy oils. Vegetable oils tend to be better absorbed by the skin than mineral oils (although mineral oils can be very useful ingredients for eczematous skin and are included to some degree in all prescription emollients). There is some debate regarding the use of groundnut oil (also known as peanut or arachis oil). Although refined peanut oil, as opposed to crude peanut oil, is generally considered safe, we advise anyone with a peanut allergy to avoid products that contain it (including oils, moisturisers and some shampoos).

Reflexology

Reflexology works on the principle that every system and organ in the body has a corresponding point or zone in the feet or hands, which can be accessed through touch. Using the thumbs, the practitioner applies a varying degree of pressure to massage each of these points or zones to help relieve tension and remove 'energy' blocks. Some people find that it helps them to relax, enabling them to 'let go', which in turn allows the body's own healing response to be activated.

Reflexology may be a good option if the condition of the skin on your body precludes your being massaged, but the reflexologist should avoid touching areas of broken skin.

Nutritional approaches and supplementation

The research evidence for nutritional approaches is patchy and there have been cases where exclusion diets have been advocated without any proper control or support. Supplementation is less of a minefield, although there is no medical evidence that supplements such as vitamin E, pyridoxine, selenium, zinc or evening primrose oil have any overall benefits for people with eczema.

It is important (and especially so with infants and children) that dietary changes are undertaken only with the advice and supervision of a qualified dietitian or nutritionist.

Research is currently underway into the use of probiotics (live bacteria) and prebiotics (non-digestible sugars that encourage the growth of 'friendly bacteria') to harness the immune system in the treatment and prevention of eczema. Results so far appear to be promising, especially with regard to the possible use of probiotics for eczema prevention, but more research is needed before we can recommend their use. Although there have been some reports of probiotics actually causing low-level infections, particularly in people whose normal immune defences are compromised, probiotics and prebiotics are generally well-tolerated and are considered safe.

Hypnotherapy

Hypnotherapy is a psychological treatment in which the therapist aims to address and make suggestions to the client's subconscious mind through the use of hypnosis.

Hypnosis is a state of mind, enhanced (though not exclusively) by mental and physical relaxation, in which our subconscious mind is able to communicate with our conscious mind. The hypnotherapist engages the client's imagination through storytelling, imagery, symbolism or direct suggestions to effect beneficial change. This is not the same as stage hypnosis. People cannot be hypnotised against their will, and remain in control during the process.

Most hypnotherapists combine hypnosis with other counselling and therapeutic techniques. Hypnotherapy, like other relaxation techniques can help people with eczema to cope better with the itch-scratch cycle and to manage and reduce stress and anxiety that may exacerbate their eczema.

Other relaxation techniques

Eczema can be a cause of stress. Stress may make people with eczema scratch more, which in turn causes their skin to flare. Relaxation and deep breathing techniques can be helpful in this case by providing valuable 'time out', inducing a sense of peace and well-being and generally making life seem a little easier to cope with. Below are details of a few relaxation techniques you may find helpful.

Autogenic training is a series of mental exercises designed to switch off the body's responses to stress and switch on those related to deep relaxation.

Meditation can be helpful in promoting a sense of calm and well-being. 'Loving kindness meditation' focuses on feelings of compassion and kindness (including towards oneself).

Mindfulness is based on the idea that we are present in the here and now in a non-judgmental way. By developing our skills in mindfulness, we can learn to become better able to respond to stress.

Yoga is well-known for the calming effects of its asanas (postures) and controlled deep breathing techniques.

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Tips for choosing a practitioner

A practitioner who is not registered may not be fully trained. Bear in mind that anyone can set themselves up as a complementary therapist, and anyone can sell products that claim to cure eczema on the internet (in opposition to medical practice).

Check that your complementary practitioner is registered, find out how much training and experience they have and whether they are experienced in treating people with eczema. Check also that the practitioner has professional indemnity insurance and ask about the cost and length of a course of treatment in advance. The following organisations can offer further information and advice:

Association of Reflexologists www.aor.org.uk

British Association for Nutrition and Lifestyle Medicine (BANT) www.bant.org.uk

British Autogenic Society
www.autogenic-therapy.org.uk

British Homeopathic Association
www.britishhomeopathic.org

British Society of Clinical Hypnosis
www.bschn.org.uk

British Wheel of Yoga www.bwy.org.uk

Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council (CNHC) www.cnhc.org.uk

Federation of Holistic Therapists (FHT)
www.fht.org.uk

General Hypnotherapy Register
www.general-hypnotherapy-register.com

International Federation of Aromatherapists
www.ifaroma.org

Mindfulness works <https://mindfulnessworks.com>

National Institute of Medical Herbalists (NIMH)
www.nimh.org.uk

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Factsheet last reviewed September 2019.

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National Eczema Society is a registered charity in England and Wales (No. 1009671) and in Scotland (No. SC043669). Registered Office: 11 Murray Street, London NW1 9RE

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