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ECZEMA

(atopic dermatitis)

Eczema is a common condition in infants and children, often easy to diagnose but a challenge to treat. If we look for the cause, whether food or an environmental irritant, we may prevent a lifetime of suffering.



What we commonly refer to as eczema is actually more appropriately termed atopic dermatitis (AD). It is a chronic itchy inflammation of the skin that affects about 15% of infants and children at some point. From a physiological point of view it is caused by skin hyper-reactivity that triggers a response to something that would have no effect on an individual without AD. It is a component of the triad asthma, allergies and eczema, with eczema often being the first presenting symptom. It is my opinion that the

treatment of eczema by allopathic medical practitioners, often involving suppression of symptoms, can result in the child going on to develop asthma and allergies.

CONVENTIONAL TREATMENT

The diagnosis of AD is usually a clinical one, the essential features being itchiness, eczema (the classic skin findings, including a dry, red, scaly skin, and/or blisters and oozing lesions), and symptoms that persist over a long time with a tendency to relapse.

Although conventional medicine does focus on IgE allergies and proper skin care, most doctors treat AD with topical steroids, calcineurin inhibitors (immunosuppressive drugs) applied to the skin, and antihistamines. All these address the symptoms and completely ignore the cause of the condition. When the symptoms are suppressed, the body has to find some other way of expressing its reactivity or imbalance. Many of these children therefore later develop allergies, and often asthma as well.

PREVENTING ATOPIC DERMATITIS

Before beginning to think about treatment, it is essential to discuss prevention. Prevention should begin before a woman even falls pregnant. It's beneficial to do a mild to moderate detox for 6 - 12 months before attempting to conceive. This can simply involve very healthy eating, exercise, saunas, and gentle detox supplements.

Once pregnant supplementation with a comprehensive multivitamin and fish oils, especially DHA, are essential. Vitamin D should be added if there is a deficiency, and probiotics are helpful. A 2001 study in the medical journal *The Lancet* showed that giving mothers probiotics during pregnancy and breast-feeding may delay the onset of AD in infants and children. Furthermore, infants given probiotics (especially premature infants), vitamin D and fish oils may be protected against developing AD. Consider not introducing cow's milk into a child's diet before 1 year of age, when the digestive system is more fully developed.

THE THERAPEUTIC ORDER

The therapeutic order is a naturopathic concept developed by two American naturopathic physicians. The order itself is flexible and pliable, but an interesting way to approach a case.

1

REMOVE OBSTACLES to cure and establish healthy living conditions

The first step in treating a patient in naturopathic medicine is to look for obstacles to cure and at his or her living conditions. Obstacles can include food allergies, diet, environmental factors, stress, people and spiritual disharmony. Healthy living conditions include enough sleep, water, nutrition, sunlight and exercise. In AD the first area to discuss is food. Food intolerances play a huge role in the causation of AD. There are two main ways of testing for these: the classic elimination diet, whereby foods are removed from a diet and then slowly reintroduced, and IgG testing, a blood test for antibody reactions to foods. It's not well accepted by the conventional medical community, but is extremely helpful.

The main food culprits tend to be cow's milk products, eggs, peanuts, wheat, soy and fish. Often just finding the aggravating food can clear up a case of AD. A breast-feeding mother may need to cut the food out of her diet.

Secondly, healthy living conditions need to be established. AD infants and children are hyper-reactive, and their environment should be super-clean. They could be reacting to the family pet, cigarette smoke, dust, plants in the garden, and a whole lot more. It's often worth investing in an air filter for a room and using a vacuum cleaner with a HEPA filter (designed to target very small pollutants and particles). Often replacing carpets is a good idea, as they harbour dust and other household allergens. Damp and/or mould in a home can also cause AD. Keeping the skin moist after exposure to water can be very helpful – apply emollients within 3 minutes of bathing.

2

STIMULATE the self-healing process

If the symptoms lessen but persist after removing obstacles to cure and establishing healthy living conditions, the next step is to stimulate the body to heal itself. From a naturopathic point of view there are three main ways to do this: hydrotherapy, homeopathy and acupuncture.

Homeopathy has had wonderful results in curing AD, especially in children. There are many different methods, but from a clinical point of view classic homeopathy, using one remedy at a time and finding the specific one to suit the individual, is outstanding. Homeopathy is also extremely safe, so one needn't hesitate to use it in infants and children.

3

ADDRESS/SUPPORT weakened or damaged systems or organs

Sometimes more than just stimulation is required. Some organs are weakened or damaged, and some systems blocked or congested. The aim is to strengthen the immune system, decrease toxicity, normalise inflammatory reactions, optimise metabolic function, balance regulatory systems, enhance regeneration and harmonise with the life force. This is accomplished by using botanical medicine, nutrients and glandulars.

In AD useful treatments at this level include natural anti-inflammatory products such as fish oils, curcumin, green tea, ginkgo biloba, grape seed extract and liquorice, among

others. Often alternatives such as burdock and dandelion (as a liver cleanser) are helpful too. Stress can often worsen eczema, especially in older children and adults, and the addition of adaptogenic herbs such as Siberian ginseng or ashwagandha can be very helpful. Nutrients such as vitamin A, vitamin D, Vitamin E, zinc and magnesium play a role too. Each individual is different, however, and has specific areas that need to be addressed.

Correct STRUCTURAL INTEGRITY

On this level we look at treatments such as chiropractic, osteopathy and craniosacral therapy. In certain conditions, such as trauma, these may be the first entry into treatment, and at times the obstacle to cure may be

4

purely structural. This is not often the case in AD, but it's still a factor to consider.

5

ADDRESS PATHOLOGY

naturally

Most cases of AD resolve before this step is necessary. In naturopathic circles this is referred to as 'green allopathy' – simply using natural products in the same way as allopathic products are used, without addressing the whole person and causation. An example in AD would be using a nutrient like quercetin as an antihistamine without addressing the reason why the patient needs the antihistamine. There are, however, cases where palliative treatment is needed while addressing cause and cure at the same time.

6 & 7

SUPPRESS or surgically remove pathology

These last two steps are often needed in treatment-resistant disorders or in more serious conditions such as cancer or HIV. Even at this level naturopathic medicine has a part to play and can be used in conjunction with allopathic medicine. In AD cortisone may be needed in a particularly stubborn case to ease suffering while continuing to treat at a curative level, or an antibiotic may be indicated if scratching causes a secondary infection.

The treatment of atopic dermatitis is multi-faceted. The importance of finding the underlying cause at an early age cannot be over-emphasised. It can often prevent or at least ease a lifetime of suffering. ●