

# Complementary therapies and eczema factsheet

Complementary therapies cover a range of health care 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 health care professional in order to avoid any adverse effects or interactions with your current treatment plan.

## General advice on using complementary therapies

Although complementary therapies are not a cure for people with eczema, some can be helpful when used alongside conventional treatments; however what one person finds beneficial may not necessarily 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 affected by eczema and certain other conditions – it's just 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, for example, precautions for individual therapies below). Always consult your health care professional first 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](http://www.mhra.gov.uk) for the latest information and advice.

Here we look at the complementary therapies that have been found most helpful and are most commonly used by people affected by eczema.

## Western herbalism

Herbal medicine is now also commonly referred to as phytotherapy. Health problems such as eczema are considered by herbalists to show that the body's natural health mechanisms have become unbalanced. Plant medicines are therefore selected mainly to stimulate the immune system or strengthen the body's normal functions and so help the body heal itself.

In the first consultation, the herbalist will review your overall health as well as your problems with 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 – for example, gentle modifications to diet combined with anti-inflammatory herbal preparations and possibly supplements such as fish oil. They can also prepare a range of ointments and lotions, tailored to the individual, which combine soothing, healing and anti-bacterial treatment.

## Complementary therapies and eczema factsheet

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 on 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.

A breakdown in the health of the skin often includes a breakdown of general immunity, so herbal treatment will always address this. Herbalists believe that skin health is an indication of the health of your gut (both are organs of elimination) and that if the gut is not functioning as well as it should, this can have a knock-on effect on the skin. The possibility of food allergy will be discussed and explored by your herbalist (food allergies are present in a significant number of children with eczema, though less so in adults). If allergy seems likely, we advise you to ask your GP to arrange a blood test to measure the specific IgE.

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 them being toxic; 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 one part of traditional Chinese medicine. Following 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 also talk to your dermatologist or other health care professional first and 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, 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 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.

## Complementary therapies and eczema factsheet

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 you having massage, but the reflexologist should avoid touching areas of broken skin.

### Nutritional approaches and supplementation

Nutritional approaches may be relevant if you have a history of atopy or allergies alongside your eczema. Care-fully researching a qualified nutritionist/dietitian is important. 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 in people with eczema.

It is important (and especially so with infants and children) that dietary changes should be 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 where 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 of any suggestions they are given.

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 great 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

## Complementary therapies and eczema factsheet

cope with. Below are details of a few 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. In particular, 'loving kindness meditation', which focuses on feelings of compassion and kindness (including towards oneself) was found in research by Dr Barbara Fredrickson to increase positive feelings, improve relationships and physical health and reduce depression in meditators.

**Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR)** is a programme developed in the 1970s by Jon Kabat-Zinn. Mindfulness is defined by Kabat-Zinn as 'a moment-to-moment non-judgmental awareness', and the MBSR programme consists of mindfulness meditation, body scanning (to help you locate and release stress in your body) and simple yoga postures. Clinical studies have found MBSR to have beneficial effects including stress reduction, relaxation and an improved quality of life. A trial involving 37 psoriasis patients who listened to a MBSR CD at the same time as using phototherapy, found that their skin improved four times more quickly than those who used the light box alone.

**Yoga** is well known for the calming effects of its asanas (postures) and controlled deep breathing techniques. According to practitioners, the balancing of hormones and the boost of oxygen-rich blood are highly beneficial to the skin.

## Tips for choosing a practitioner

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](http://www.aor.org.uk)

**British Association for Applied Nutrition and Nutritional Therapy (BANT)** [www.bant.org.uk](http://www.bant.org.uk)

**British Autogenic Society**  
[www.autogenic-therapy.org.uk](http://www.autogenic-therapy.org.uk)

**British Homeopathic Association**  
[www.britishhomeopathic.org](http://www.britishhomeopathic.org)

**British Society of Clinical Hypnosis** [www.bschn.org.uk](http://www.bschn.org.uk)

**British Wheel of Yoga** [www.bwy.org.uk](http://www.bwy.org.uk)

**Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council (CNHC)** [www.cnhc.org.uk](http://www.cnhc.org.uk)

**Federation of Holistic Therapists (FHT)**  
[www.fht.org.uk](http://www.fht.org.uk)

**General Hypnotherapy Register**  
[www.general-hypnotherapy-register.com](http://www.general-hypnotherapy-register.com)

**International Federation of Aromatherapists**  
[www.ifaroma.org](http://www.ifaroma.org)

**Mindfulness training** [www.mbsr.co.uk](http://www.mbsr.co.uk)

**National Institute of Medical Herbalists (NIMH)**  
[www.nimh.org.uk](http://www.nimh.org.uk)

### DISCLAIMER

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