

Complementary therapies and eczema

This factsheet focuses on complementary therapies, which are defined as treatments that should not replace but are used in addition to medical care.

Complementary therapies are different from alternative therapies, which are treatments used instead of conventional medical care. However, the NHS states there is no universally agreed definition of complementary and alternative therapies.

The NHS defines complementary therapies as treatments or healthcare approaches that are not usually part of mainstream NHS care, but people may choose to use alongside conventional treatments to help manage symptoms, support wellbeing and improve quality of life.

If you are considering using a complementary therapy for eczema (or any other condition), it is important you firstly discuss with your NHS healthcare professional or private medical practitioner to avoid any adverse effects or interactions with your current conventional medical treatments.

General advice on using complementary therapies

Although complementary therapies can never be a cure for eczema (even if some people claim 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, but if you have severe eczema, uncontrolled flares or skin infection, complementary therapies would not be recommended.

It is 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 trying a complementary therapy.

Listed below are some of the most used complementary therapies.

Western herbalism

Herbal medicine is commonly referred to as phytotherapy. Herbal medicines do not treat eczema but can help relieve symptoms of eczema which affect quality of life, including improving sleep, stress (which may reduce itching) and general wellbeing. Herbal medicines should be used with the same care and respect as conventional medicines, as they can still potentially cause harm. Being natural does not always mean they are safe, and they can cause problems if you are also taking other medicines.

Evidence for the effectiveness of herbal medicines is generally very limited.

Not all herbal medicines are regulated. Remedies specially prepared for individuals do not need a licence, and those manufactured outside the UK may not be subject to regulation.

If you wish to try a herbal medicine, look out for a traditional herbal registration (THR) marking on the product packaging. This means the medicine complies with quality standards relating to safety and manufacturing, and information about how and when to use the medicine is provided. Please be aware that THR products are intended for conditions that can be self medicated (e.g. a cold).

Do bear in mind that the risks of obtaining fake, substandard, unlicensed or contaminated medicines are increased by buying medicines online or by mail order. Unlicensed herbal medicines manufactured outside the UK may not be subject to regulation.

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 3-5 consecutive days, as sensitisation (becoming sensitive to an allergen) often takes a while to develop.

Herbal remedies can have powerful side effects. 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.

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 for the effectiveness of 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.

The MHRA website provides a list of herbal ingredients that are prohibited or restricted in medicines. 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 market stalls), as some have been found to contain topical steroids of varying potencies, including Dermovate (clobetasol) – a very strong topical steroid.

High potency (strong and very strong steroids have been found in the following herbal creams, which have been issued with safety warnings from the MRHA:

- Zudaifu Cream: A Chinese herbal cream often sold online, found to contain the potent steroid clobetasol propionate and antifungal ingredients.
- Yiganerjing Cream: Marketed as a natural cream for skin conditions, it was found to contain clobetasol propionate.
- Dermaved Sensitive Cream: An Ayurvedic product found to contain clobetasol propionate.
- Intensive Body Lotion with Aloe Vera (OSAS): Found to contain the steroid betamethasone.
- "Pink" or "Orange" Creams: Often marketed as "miracle creams" for eczema, found to contain high levels of potent steroids.
- Wau Wa Cream / Muijiza Cream: Found to contain clobetasol propionate.

These products are dangerous as they contain strong or very strong steroids and can cause skin thinning, infections and topical steroid withdrawal (when stopped).

We therefore recommend that if you decide to try Chinese herbal medicine, you do your research carefully in choosing a practitioner, and always ask for a list of the ingredients that have been prescribed for you.

You need to inform your GP before you have treatment with Chinese herbal medicine as you may require blood monitoring, particularly liver function tests.

Acupuncture

Acupuncture is a complementary therapy which originated in ancient China. It involves inserting very thin sterile needles into specific points on the body. These points are chosen after assessment of symptoms, general health and sometimes pulse and tongue checks.

There is a traditional acupuncture 'energy view' based on 'Qi', which flows through the body in channels as energy which if blocked causes sickness, and unblocking through acupuncture restores qi. The scientific or Western (modern) view is that acupuncture stimulates nerves, muscles and connective tissue boosting endorphins and serotonin, increasing blood flow to promote healing.

There is limited evidence in eczema management, but it is thought acupuncture may help eczema by regulating the immune system, which may help reducing flares, itch and lowering stress.

The NHS supports acupuncture with a qualified practitioner, and some GPs and most pain clinics use acupuncture in clinical practice.

Homeopathy

Homeopathy involves treating a person with highly diluted substances. Based on symptoms, the homeopath will match the most appropriate medicine(s) to each patient, with a principle of treating like for like. This means that a substance that causes certain symptoms is thought to also help remove those symptoms.

Investigations into the effectiveness of homeopathy have found there is no good quality evidence that it is effective as a treatment for any health condition

A 2010 House of Commons Science and Technology Committee report concluded that homeopathy is no more effective than a placebo (dummy treatment).

In 2017, NHS England announced it would no longer fund homeopathy on the NHS, as the lack of evidence for its effectiveness did not justify the cost. This was backed by a High Court judgment in 2018.

Ayurvedic herbal medicine

Ayurvedic herbal medicine is based in Indian tradition and designed to balance body and mind through herbal remedies and lifestyle changes (including yoga and meditation). This is an increasing complementary therapy offered in the UK, and concerns regarding the herbal medicines used are similar to Chinese herbal medicine and the same cautions should be applied.

Evidence is limited with both Chinese and Ayurvedic herbal medicine and there have been reports of people having liver and kidney damage from these treatments. It is very important to inform your GP if you are seeing these practitioners and taking herbal medicine.

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 wellbeing.

Many people with eczema are sensitive to fragrance (including airborne fragrance, e.g. from a candle or diffuser) and cannot tolerate aromatherapy oils in any form. Many essential oils can cause allergic contact dermatitis. 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 3-5 consecutive days, in case your skin has an adverse reaction. Do not use them on broken skin.

Aromatherapy oils are commonly 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. Oils made from nuts, such as arachis oil or almond oil, should also be avoided, as rubbing nut-based oils into the skin increases the risk of developing a nut allergy. 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.

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 relax, enabling them to let go, which, in turn, allows the body's own healing response to be activated.

Reflexology is not advised if you have a flare up or more severe eczema, as massage may cause more irritation or itching and be an infection risk.

Nutritional approaches and supplementation

The research evidence for nutritional approaches is wide ranging, with many nutritional supplements having been studied. Vitamin E, pyridoxine, selenium, zinc and evening primrose oil have all been researched and shown not to offer any overall benefits for people with eczema.

A key clinical review in 2015 proposed a link between eczema and lower levels of vitamin D, and found that vitamin D helped protect the skin barrier and suppress inflammation. A 2018 systematic review found that children under 18 with low vitamin D levels had more severe eczema, with 67% seeing improvements after taking vitamin D supplements. Research published in the British Journal of Dermatology revealed that babies had a lower risk of developing atopic eczema in their first year if their mothers took 25mcg of vitamin D daily from 14 weeks of pregnancy until delivery. However, overall, there is not enough evidence that vitamin D affects the development of atopic eczema. Most supplements (including evening primrose oil) do not show any benefit in 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. Restrictive diets should not be undertaken unless supervised by a dietician.

Commercial food intolerance tests (including IgG food testing, hair analysis and vega testing) are not recommended by the NHS, and may lead to unnecessary dietary restriction.

Probiotics (live microorganisms) and prebiotics (nondigestible sugars that encourage the growth of friendly bacteria) have been studied to see whether they can help prevent eczema or improve symptoms. Results have shown no direct benefit for eczema, so probiotics should not be used as a treatment for established eczema. However, there is some limited evidence in studies to show that they can help prevent eczema developing but there is currently no clear guidance about which probiotics to use.

While probiotics do not improve established eczema symptoms, studies show that they can help prevent eczema from developing in babies that are predisposed to eczema. For this to work, the mother would have to take probiotics during the last trimester of pregnancy, and ideally the baby would receive supplements as well.

It is not possible to say with certainty, though, which probiotics would be the best ones to take, as the studies used various combinations of lactobacillus and bifidobacterium probiotic preparations.

Hypnotherapy

Hypnotherapy is a psychological treatment in which the therapist aims to address and make suggestions to the clients subconscious mind using hypnosis. It should be carried out by a skilled professional who has had rigorous training in hypnotherapy, who usually also has a background in medicine, nursing or psychology.

Hypnosis is a state of mind, enhanced by mental and physical relaxation, in which our subconscious mind can communicate with our conscious mind. The hypnotherapist engages the clients 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 throughout the process.

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

Relaxation psychological and behavioural approaches

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 by providing valuable time out, inducing a sense of peace and wellbeing 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.

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) is practical 'talking therapy' which helps people manage and change how they think and behave. It may help improve mental health in eczema as it is based on an understanding that thoughts, feelings, physical sensations and actions are all connected.

A practical approach using CBT is habit reversal which helps patient to understand the itch-scratch-damage cycle, and can improve itch perception, sleep and quality of life.

Meditation can be helpful in promoting a sense of calm and wellbeing. 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 become better at responding to stress.

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

Recent complementary therapies

Blue light/red light therapy the commercial claims for red/blue light are often exaggerated and evidence for helping eczema is limited.

Cannabis-derived products (CBD creams/oils) Evidence is very limited and topical products may cause contact dermatitis. Some cannabis products may be unregulated so caution is advised as they may contain hidden steroids.

Salt baths/dead sea salts can be soothing in baths for people with eczema, however if skin is broken or fissured (cracked), they can sting.

Tips for choosing a practitioner

Bear in mind that anyone can set themselves up as a complementary therapist, and anyone can sell products on the internet that claim to cure eczema (in opposition to medical practice).

Check that your complementary practitioner is registered with the Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council and/or other relevant professional body, and find out how much training and experience they have and whether they are experienced in treating people with eczema.

Practitioner registration does not mean that therapy they offer is proven and effective for eczema, as registration ensures you that professional standards are being met. Complementary practitioners, unlike health care professionals are not legally required to be registered or regulated.

Check also that the practitioner has professional indemnity insurance and ask about the cost and length of a course of treatment in advance.

Key regulatory authorities

The following organisations can offer further information and advice:

Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council (CNHC)

www.cnhc.org.uk - Set up with the government to protect the public. The main voluntary register for various therapies

General Regulatory Council for Complementary Therapists (GRCCT)

www.grcct.org

British Register of Complementary Practitioners (BRCP)

www.brmp.org.uk

Professional associations and membership bodies:

British Acupuncture Council

www.acupuncture.org.uk

British Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapists (BABCP)

www.bacbp.com

Association of Reflexologists

www.aor.org.uk

British Association for Nutrition and Lifestyle Medicine

www.bant.org.uk

British Autogenic Society

<https://britishautogenicsociety.uk>

British Society of Clinical Hypnosis

www.bschn.org.uk

British Wheel of Yoga

www.bwy.org.uk

Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council

www.cnhc.org.uk

Federation of Holistic Therapists

www.fht.org.uk

General Hypnotherapy Register

www.general-hypnotherapy-register.com

Homeopathy UK

<https://homeopathy-uk.org>

International Federation of Aromatherapists

www.ifaroma.org

Mindfulness Works

<https://mindfulnessworks.com>

Disclaimer

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We hope you find the information helpful, although it should not be relied upon as a substitute for personalised advice from a qualified healthcare professional. While we strive to ensure the information is accurate and up-to-date, Eczema UK does not accept any liability arising from its use.

We welcome reader feedback on our publications, please email us at info@eczema.org



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