

TCM: rash moves

The causes of many skin rashes are difficult to identify, but are usually related to allergies, genetic factors, physical problems and stress. Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) treats these rashes as being due to irritated skin, together with abnormal responses of the internal organs. TCM has herbal treatments that can help to resolve various skin complaints.

It's believed that skin rashes most often appear as pathological wind changes that can be observed typically with red patches, welts and itchiness. Herbs pungent in flavour and with dispelling properties should be selected for treatment; such herbs include schizonepeta herb, mulberry leaf and peppermint. When the rashes are widespread, herbs for cooling the blood and clearing the heat help arrest the eruptions, such as rhemannia root, figwort root and peony root bark.

Skin conditions caused by damp-heat pathogens are characterised by red patches, blisters, swelling and oozing surfaces. Practitioners use herbs such as glabrous greenbrier rhizome, virgate wormwood herb and sopora root to clear the rash and dry the lesions.

Toxins and heat pathogens lead to the formation of pus, a thick discharge, burning sensation, severe redness and swelling. Appropriate herbs include wild chrysanthemum, dandelion and honeysuckle flowers. Heat-clearing herbs are always suitable for stubborn and frequent problems.

Particular internal dysfunctions are likely to turn the skin condition into a chronic one. When there is a blood deficiency, the skin appears dry, thickened, cracked and scaly, and is extremely itchy; herbs such as angelica root, fleecflower root and peony root are selected for treatment.

Blood stasis makes the lesions appear as purplish patches, red nodules, with thickening and a coloured oozing surface; common ingredients for treatment are peach kernel, safflower and turmeric root-tuber.

Nourishing the blood is important in the elderly and weakened patients if itchiness is a major complaint. In chronic and severe skin conditions, patients are usually depleted in blood and *chi* which makes the body unable to prevent further irritation by pathogens, so herbs such as astragalus root and ginseng (left) should be selected.

Invigorating the spleen will also help chronic conditions that are exacerbated by dampness pathogens; suitable herbs include pilose asiabell root, poria and largehead atractylodes rhizome. When the skin lesions look pale or dull and feel cool to the touch, warming herbs such as

monkshood, cassia bark and dried ginger help to activate the area.

Lastly, to ensure a complete healing process, herbs for invigorating the liver and kidney such as morinda root, cornus fruit and glossy privet fruit are necessary, especially if there are general signs such as persistent low fever, dizziness and insomnia.

All these herbs are often prescribed for other conditions as well. TCM remedies for skin conditions are unlikely to have the immediate effects of conventional drugs. However, with hundreds of herbs to choose from, experienced TCM practitioners can tailor-make a treatment for patients.

In addition, the combined herbs act in a complementary fashion and tend to have a broad and non-specific action on a number of the body's physiological systems. The overall outcome helps strengthen the body and helps it to regain its normal balanced state.

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