

HEALTH

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TCM: dermatitis

Our skin is supposed to be the protective barrier that insulates the body against trauma, infection or extreme environments.

Unfortunately, some people often suffer from dermatitis, an uncomfortable inflammation of the skin. Dermatitis can have many causes and take many forms, such as eczema, drug rash, contact dermatitis and seborrhoeic dermatitis.

Skin conditions are correlated with the internal, since TCM considers the human body an organic whole, all parts being connected with one another by channels called meridians. TCM holds that the development of dermatitis has a strong constitutional basis. Internal disharmonies make the body surface susceptible to various irritants.

It is important to identify the disharmonies and treat these by integrating internal and external approaches for better healing.

TCM has its own principles for diagnosing dermatological conditions. Physicians will look at the skin lesions to ascertain pathogenic influences, which usually involve wind, heat, dampness and toxic pathogens.

Wind pathogens lead to itchy, discrete skin rashes of various shapes that cover large areas of the body. Heat pathogens make the rash turn red and swollen. Damp pathogens lead to blisters, ulcers and effusion. Toxic pathogens lead to pus formation, burning or pain.

The condition of the blood is also important, as it is responsible for nourishing the skin. Blood stasis leads to coarse skin texture, nodules, thickening and fixed pain. Over-heated blood leads to severe swelling, red patches and bleeding under the skin. And blood deficiency leads to skin dryness, peeling, cracking, and thickening.

Physicians will focus on the

appearance and distribution of the skin rashes. Red patches which turn pale when touched indicate a mild condition. If there is no colour change this indicates a more serious condition. Red patches spreading to a large area of the body usually indicate a wind-heat condition; dark and purplish patches indicate blood stasis; pale patches are usually seen in *qi* stagnation or blood and *qi* disharmony.

Raised red patches that have scaly surfaces indicate heat and wind in the blood; dry scaling is due to blood deficiency; and greasy or wet scaling means damp-heat accumulation. If the skin is dry and scaly with a generalised itchiness, and the itchiness is aggravated at night, the blood is seriously affected.

Internal organ dysfunctions are related to particular skin abnormalities. Rashes with raised red patches that burn and itch usually indicate excessive fire in the heart.

Acute generalised skin lesions that are accompanied with heat signs such as acute eczema, shingles and contact dermatitis, usually indicate excessive fire in the liver and heart or damp-heat in the liver and gallbladder.

Spleen dysfunction can cause dampness in the skin, which leads to clusters of raised patches or chronic wet skin lesions such as chronic eczema. Skin rashes on the face such as acne and rosacea usually develop due to heat accumulating in the lungs and stomach or damp-heat in the lungs and spleen.

Kidney dysfunction, meanwhile, will cause the skin to become dark and discoloured.

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Rose Tse and Jenny Eagleton are with Integrated Chinese Medicine Holdings (icm.com.hk). Before taking any medicine, consult your TCM or medical practitioner