

## YOGIC TREATMENT OF DISEASE

### **Eczema and Psoriasis**

Affecting a total of 20.5 million in the United States alone<sup>1&2</sup>, eczema and psoriasis are the two most prevalent dermatological diseases people suffer with daily. The diseases are common and non-discriminating to any age group, with children being more susceptible to eczema and adults to psoriasis. With many people living with the discomforts of the diseases, there are also numerous methodologies for relief and cures. The two schools of thought presented are an allopathic (Western Medicine) and yogic (Yoga Therapy) approach for eczema and psoriasis alleviation.

Before we can understand the cures for eczema and psoriasis, it is important to know the pathophysiology of each. According to Western Medicine, the exact cause of eczema is unknown,<sup>3</sup> but it most likely appears on individuals with a family history of the disease. So there is a genetic underlying cause. Unfortunately, this chronic condition can be triggered at any time, without pre-symptomatic notice. Some of the most common triggers are environmental, such as allergic reactions to pollen, drugs, dry air, and dust mites. Additionally chemicals in cleaning products, detergent, soaps, and perfumes can irritate the skin drastically.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Statistics by Country for Eczema.” <http://www.wrongdiagnosis.com/e/eczema/stats-country.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> “Psoriasis-how Yoga and Ayurveda can help.” [http://www.furtherhealth.com/article/37\\_1\\_Psoriasis---how-Yoga-and-Ayurveda-can-help/](http://www.furtherhealth.com/article/37_1_Psoriasis---how-Yoga-and-Ayurveda-can-help/).

<sup>3</sup> “Treating Eczema with Yoga and Ayurveda.” <http://www.headfirstyoga.com/2009/04/treating-eczema-with-yoga-and-ayurveda.html>.

On the other hand, the pathophysiology of psoriasis is clearer to understand. Psoriasis is an autoimmune disease of the skin that occurs when the immune system sends out faulty signs that speed up the growth cycle of skin cells. This process is considered similar to the healing of wounds. For example, when a normal wound heals, the growth of the skin cycle stops. However, for psoriasis patients, once this process is triggered, skin cells are stimulated and continue to grow. This usually does not stop until the cycle is interrupted with treatment.<sup>4</sup> The main trigger for psoriasis is stress and like eczema, the cause of psoriasis is also linked to family genetics. Statistically, children with both parents suffering from psoriasis are likely to have a 50% chance of developing the disease.<sup>2</sup>

From the yogic perspective, both psoriasis and eczema are a result of high stress levels and toxins.<sup>3</sup> During stressful situations, the inflammation in the skin worsens aggravating the skin and the disease tends to spread. Even though the symptoms become more acute, both diseases are not contagious and will not spread to those who do not suffer with psoriasis.

Although eczema and psoriasis are both dermatological diseases, the signs and symptoms of each are quite different. Eczema also known as atopic dermatitis is an inflammation of the skin affecting the top layers of the epidermis.<sup>3</sup> Eczematic patients suffer with extremely sensitive skin that is dry and itchy. The dryness results from a lack of moisture retention in the epidermis layers. Very similar to the surface of a dry riverbed, the skin's surface often cracks creating lesions. This can be quite painful, bloody, and restraining

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<sup>4</sup> "Dermatitis." <http://www.peacefulmind.com/dermatitis.htm>.

on daily activities. Other symptoms include redness, scaling, thickening of the skin, swelling, and weeping blisters.<sup>4</sup>

When symptoms become inflamed, a burning and itching sensation rushes through that particular area leading to scratching. Although the scratching can alleviate the burning and itching, it leads to opening/spreading the affected area and in the worst cases, infection. These symptoms often appear on the hands, feet, face, ears, legs, and the flexion areas of joints such as under knees and inside elbows.

Triggers for inflamed symptoms can be internal and external. As mentioned above, environmental factors are the main external causes. Internal factors, besides stress, are allergic reactions to food, poor functioning liver, and a weak immune system. Common food allergies for most eczema patients include eggs, dairy, wheat products (gluten), shellfish, and corn.<sup>4</sup> Weak liver function plays a significant role because the liver is largest cleansing organ in the body. Therefore, if the liver is not cleansing the body correctly or enough, the unfiltered toxins must then be released from the skin, the largest organ in our bodies. Lastly, a delicate immune system is powerless against allergens and cannot fend the body from skin irritations that occur in eczematic patients.

On the same note, psoriasis is an autoimmune disease that has been identified into five categories, which are plaque, guttate, inverse, pustular, and erythrodermic.<sup>5</sup> Plaque Psoriasis is the most common affecting 80% of all psoriasis cases.<sup>4</sup> The skin of these patients appear red and develop raised and thick patches of skin called plaques. The red patches are

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<sup>5</sup> For the purpose of the paper, I will only provide details on symptoms for the most common type of psoriasis, otherwise known as plaque psoriasis.

covered by silvery-white scales from the over growth of skin cells. Additional symptoms include genital lesions in males, joint pain (psoriatic arthritis), and nail changes like thickening, yellow-brown spots, dents, and separation from nail base.<sup>6</sup> The scalp, chest, and lower back are the areas of the body very likely affected by plaque growth. Conversely to eczema, psoriasis distresses the outside areas of joints like the elbows and kneecaps.

From a yogic perspective, the seat of these symptoms can be perceived as a physical dysfunction of various chakras in the body. Both eczema and psoriasis are a result of the root (Muladhara) chakra and solar plexus (Manipura) chakra imbalances.<sup>7</sup> Eczema has an additional chakra focal point, which is the throat (Vishuddha) chakra. Muladhara chakra governs survival, vitality, and mental stability. Therefore stress is the biggest cause of Muladhara imbalance. Manipura chakra physically governs the liver and digestion.<sup>8</sup> So when the liver is weak, one knows that their solar plexus chakra is also out of balance leading to increase symptoms. Lastly, the throat chakra governs the endocrine system, the thyroid and parathyroid. According to Bryan D. Bertsch, the physical affects of a blockage in the Vishuddha chakra can result in eczema<sup>9</sup> because frustration and mental distress from non-communication can increase signs and symptoms.

Allopathic medicine provides numerous medical treatments for eczema and psoriasis, but no cure. Some of the common medical treatments for eczema and psoriasis are as listed:

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<sup>6</sup> "Psoriasis." Google Health: <https://health.google.com/health/ref/Psoriasis>.

<sup>7</sup> Cross, John R. "Acupuncture and the Chakra Energy System: Treating the Cause of Disease." North Atlantic Books. 2008 July 29. Pg. 135.

<sup>8</sup> Chakra Energy Chart. <http://www.chakraenergy.com/chart.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Bertsch, Bryan D. "Chakra Information Packet." [www.bryanbertsch.com](http://www.bryanbertsch.com)

### **Common Medical Treatment for Eczema<sup>10</sup>**

- Applying topical corticosteroids or anti-itch lotions to the inflamed areas.
- Taking oral corticosteroids to reduce inflammation.
- Applying topical immunomodulators (TIMs) that include tacrolimus (Protopic) and pimecrolimus (Elidel). These medications do not contain corticosteroids.
- Using mild soaps when bathing.
- When washing or bathing, keep water contact as brief as possible and use less soap than usual. After bathing, it is important to trap the moisture in the skin by applying lubricating cream on the skin while it is damp. Dry skin often makes the condition worse. Temperature changes and stress may cause sweating and aggravate the condition.
- Avoiding irritants whether food or environmental.

### **Common Medical Treatment for Psoriasis<sup>6</sup>**

- Cortisone (anti-itch) cream
- Creams or ointments that contain coal tar or anthralin
- Creams to remove the scaling (usually salicylic acid or lactic acid)
- Dandruff shampoos (over-the-counter or prescription)
- Moisturizers
- Prescription medicines containing vitamin D or vitamin A (retinoids)
- Antibiotics to fight infected areas

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<sup>10</sup> "Eczema." Google Health: <https://health.google.com/health/ref/Eczema>

- Biologics that specifically target the body's immune response (only prescribed in severe cases where prior treatments have failed)

Interestingly enough, most of the common treatments are topical ointments, steroids, or solutions to put on the affected area. However, when use of these topical prescriptions stop, the symptoms flare back up immediately. The constant use of steroids and chemical solutions have side effects that result in thinning skin, suppressing the immune system, and developing dependency upon those drugs.

From a yogic perspective, cures for eczema and psoriasis involve a whole body treatment or a more holistic approach to relief. There are numerous references and techniques for cures, but only the major and most affective approaches will be discussed.

Yoga Therapy and Ayurveda suggest pranayama, asana, balancing Pitta dosha, specific herbs, nutrition, shatkarma, and meditation as promising recommendations for eczema sufferers. Each yogic remedy is detailed below:<sup>3</sup>

- **Pranayama:** Kapalbhati and Nadi Shodhan should be practiced for 15 minutes. Kapalbhati pranayama removes toxins from the respiratory system and Nadi Shodhan pranayama increases the oxygen levels in the lungs tremendously which helps in cleaning the nerves. Both these pranayamas also reduce stress.
  - Extended Exhale Breathing is also beneficial as it allows the body to work towards an alkaline state as opposed to an acidic state. Alkalinity brings rejuvenation and relief to the body.
  - Deep Diaphragm Breath/3 part Breath: In a comfortable seated position, the breath is inhaled slowly and evenly from the diaphragm, through the nose.

The lower abdomen, lungs, and chest are filled with air. Hold for a four count and then exhale slowly releasing air from the chest, lungs, and then lower abdomen.

- **Asana:** Postures that improve the endocrine system and massage thyroid and parathyroid glands. Such asanas include sarvangasana, halasana, cat & cow, janusirsasana, and the Tibetan Rites. These should be practiced with deep breathing, holding postures for 3-5 breaths and up to 21 rounds for the Tibetan Rites.
- **Balancing Pitta:** From the perspective of Ayurveda, one of the major reasons for skin diseases is the disturbance of Pitta dosha. When heat in the body becomes excessive, skin eruptions may arise. Pitta vikruti (imbalance of the dosha) is prone to acid peptid disorders, liver and gal bladder problems, ulcers, colitis, and headaches.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, Pitta restoration is crucial for symptomatic relief. Balance can come from eliminating foods that trigger more heat in the body such as garlic and chilly peppers.
- **Specific Herbs:**
  - **Neem Leaves<sup>3</sup>:** use of neem (*azadirachta indica*) leaves can be used as both oral and as topical treatment. It is recommended to chew 10-12 neem leaves with water in the morning, but in modern society fresh neem leaves might be hard to come by. So capsule forms are also available. Taking the leaves or capsules for 10-15 days will reduce inflammation and infection. Topical

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<sup>11</sup> Joshi, Sunil V. MD. "Ayurveda & Panchakarma." Lotus Press, Twin Lakes, Wisconsin. 1996. Pg. 112.

variations include neem soap or oil that can be used to rub on the skin directly. Neem leaves can be used to treat psoriasis symptoms as well.

- Chamomile is a mild sedative, anti-inflammatory, and antibacterial, it improves digestion by relaxing the muscles throughout the gastrointestinal system and it can induce an overall sense of calm and well-being. The medicinal properties range from skin inflammations to lightening hair to treating digestive problems. <sup>4</sup> Chamomile is usually taken in tea form and lotions can be applied directly to effected areas.
- Dandelion is a leading remedy for detoxing the liver. It stimulates the flow of bile, a fluid that aids fat digestion, which is why it's used for liver and gallbladder disorders. Dandelion has scientifically documented potent diuretic properties. It relieves constipation and eases bloating and swelling. Dandelion should be used for 4 to 6 weeks at a time. For it's liver benefits dandelion is helpful for skin disorders. <sup>4</sup>
- Burdock root helps to purify blood and restore the liver to aid in a restful sleep. The root reduces build up of toxins in the skin resulting in boils and other skin disorders. It further helps gallbladder functions and stimulates the immune system.<sup>4</sup>
- **Nutrition:** Eat to balance Pitta dosha and some foodstuffs to avoid are eggs, milk, wheat products, nightshades (tomatoes, eggplants, and bell peppers), overly sweet, overly spicy, corn, and shellfish.



- Flaxseed oil taken orally or applied externally often eases symptoms of eczema.<sup>4</sup>
- **Shatkarma:** Vaman Dhouti<sup>12</sup> or yogic vomiting is one of the shatkarma or yogic cleansing methods. Vaman Dhouti balances Pitta by relieving the stomach of gerd symptoms like heart burn, acid reflux, and the like.
- **Meditation:** Of all the remedies provided by Yoga Therapy, there is nothing more powerful than meditation to reduce stress. Stress is one of the critical factors that aggravate both diseases. Meditation should be practiced daily in a calming environment for at least 15-20 minutes at a time working up to 30+ minutes. Meditation benefits the body by lowering blood pressure, decrease heart and respiratory rate, increase blood flow, and increase the relaxation response.

As for psoriasis, the most common and affective yogic remedy for psoriasis is through pranayama. There are seven pranayama techniques that were found to respond positively and are explained below:<sup>2</sup>

- **Bhastrika pranayama:** With your hands resting on your knees and arms stretched straight, close your eyes and inhale deeply through both the nostrils. If a nostril is blocked for some reason, close it with your thumb or the two middle fingers and inhale with the other nostril. Follow this up with exhalation. Exhale deeply till you empty out all the stale air inside your lungs. Do this exercise for two to three minutes.

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<sup>12</sup> "Vaman Dhouti for Gerd Relief." <http://yogaandexercise.blogspot.com/2009/01/vaman-dhouti-for-gerd-relief.html>.

- **Kapalbharti (KB) pranayama:** This is a double-nostril breathing exercise. This consists of a series of quick exhalations accompanied by an inward drawing motion of the stomach. You must sit in the same position as you did for bhasrika, to do this exercise. You must concentrate only on the exhalations; the inhalations take place involuntarily. Thus to set the pace for KB, take one an exhalation and an inward stomach movement per second. Do this continuously for five minutes without stopping.
  - However, if you are a beginner, you may take anywhere between a few days to a few weeks to achieve this speed. You can start off slowly; maybe do it continuously for two to three minutes, stop, and then start again. You must work towards doing KB for 15 minutes at a time, with a rest period every five minutes.
- **Bahya pranayama:** Sitting cross-legged, with your eyes closed, inhale deeply to allow air to fill up your lungs fully. Hold the air now for a few moments. Then exhale forcefully, thus emptying the air from all the air sacs of your lungs completely. Hold your breath now again. Do this for two to three minutes.
- **Aalom Vilom (AV) pranayama:** This is a single-nostril breathing exercise. Sitting in the cross-legged posture, press your right nostril with your thumb. Inhale deeply, without any exertion, through the left nostril. Begin inhalation through the left nostril only, followed by inhalation through the right nostril. Allow exhalations smoothly, but deeply, without exertion. Each inhalation and exhalation should not take more than two to two and a half seconds. You should do AV also for five

minutes at a stretch. Thus, 100-120 inhalations and exhalations together over a period of five minutes are ideal. However, if you are a beginner, take your time to get to the five-minute-at-a-stretch norm. Start off slower, and as your body gets used to it, increase the speed. As in the case of KB, you must ultimately be able to do AV too for 15 minutes, with stoppages every five minutes, during a single yoga session.

- **Agnisaar pranayama:** Inhale deeply but slowly, pushing your stomach muscles outward, as if filling up your stomach with air. Exhale deeply right thereafter, pulling your stomach muscles inward, as if trying to pull your stomach in as close to your back as possible. Hold your breath here and move your stomach in and out vigorously as many times as possible, before releasing it and allowing air to fill up your lungs. Do this exercise three times, five times or 11 times, as prescribed.
- **Bhramari pranayama:** Close your eyes and plug your ears tightly with the thumbs of both the hands. Put the forefingers of your hands on your forehead, over your eyebrows, and the middle fingers of the two hands right on your closed eyes. Inhale deeply and say “OM”, WITHOUT opening your mouth, so that you make a humming sound that travels from your mouth to your ears.
  - You may feel a little pain in the ears when you hum “OM”. The humming of “OM” has special significance in the vast discipline of yoga; we can discuss this separately. For the present, it is enough to know that the humming of ‘OM’ during Bhramari pranayama generates energy.

- You can feel the energy at your ears and also its flow down your whole body during this exercise. A soothing chill follows and stays at your ears and your forehead for quite sometime.
- **Udgeet pranayama:** Close your eyes. Now, take your hands off your face and place them on your knees. Take a deep breath in and then exhale, saying "OM". There is a specific way of uttering the word 'OM' here - stress on the syllable "O" as long as the breath lasts, utter the syllable "M" right at the end. Do this three, five or 11 times as prescribed.
  - Thereafter, rub your hands together vigorously to generate heat and place them on your eyes. Open your eyes to an altogether different world that you will experience. At this moment you are thoroughly charged and yet you are at your calmest. Stay in this position for two to three minutes. Keep sitting like this for sometime before you conclude the yoga session. While doing the breathing exercises direct the energy generated towards the affected parts of the skin by thinking about its well-being.

Other yogic remedies for psoriasis include topical application of aloe vera on the skin's plaque build up. The soft and soothing gel from the leaves aids the inflammation of the plaque sites. Another topical Ayurvedic remedy involves neem leaves and cow dung. Extracts of neem leaves, cow dung, and cow urine are mixed in equal volumes. The cow dung extract should be mixed with water and filtered as to only retain the liquid parts. This mixture is then applied on the affected skin and left for several hours before bathing. In severe cases of psoriasis, the application can be done two to three times a day. Although

rather repulsive, this method is said to be time tested and quite effective, with absolutely no side effects.<sup>2</sup>

The topic of eczema and psoriasis is near and dear to my heart, since I have been suffering with eczema for the last 24 years and my sister was diagnosed with psoriasis only 2 years ago. The causes in our case can be attributed to genetics as my grandfather lived with psoriasis for the last 20 years of his life. He passed his genes along to my sister, me, and three other cousins with eczema. Therefore, this topic was important and even more so extremely personal for me to research alternative treatments. Having tried the gamut of conventional treatments, namely topical steroids, I know that there is another spectrum of remedies that I can test, without suffering from the side affects of the steroids and chemicals. Before the research, I too, believed that eczema and psoriasis had no cure, but through yoga therapy I know now that there can be relief.