

The Naturopathic Approach to Skin Disorders: *Treating the cause vs. managing the symptoms*

By Dr. Deidre Macdonald, N.D.

Skin problems can cause significant distress in that they can cause itching, pain and disfigurement. Of all the types of health challenges I work with, I find it particularly rewarding to be able to help patients with skin problems. This is certainly one area of medicine in which the naturopathic approach can be much more effective at producing a lasting cure than the conventional approach.

As a naturopathic physician I see skin problems as an external manifestation of an internal problem. With that perspective, I am able to address the underlying causes of skin problems and in most cases, teach people how they can lessen or even eliminate their problem on a long term basis, without the use of drugs. Conditions like acne, eczema, psoriasis, rosacea, chronic fungal or bacterial infections, seborrheic dermatitis, chronic hives, diaper rash, and dermatitis herpetiformis all typically respond very well to the inside-out approach.

Conventional medicine, for the most part, treats skin problems topically. The most common drugs prescribed for skin conditions are steroids. They often provide immediate relief from symptoms, but will rarely cure the problem. Steroids suppress the body's inflammatory signals so rashes often appear to "get better" after a short period of use. However, since the cause of the problem is still there, when the steroids are stopped, the symptoms often come back worse than ever. So why not just stay on topical steroids forever? The side effects of long term treatment are significant and include:

- Skin atrophy: thinning of the skin and underlying connective tissue causing skin to become lax, wrinkled and shiny.
- Increased risk of permanent, often itchy stretch marks
- Decreased immune function in the skin makes the skin more susceptible to bacterial or fungal rashes. People using topical steroids to "treat" eczema may be more likely to develop impetigo which is a bacterial (staph or strep) infection in the eczema affected areas.

Another common approach to skin problems is the use of oral antibiotics, particularly for acne. While the skin may improve, the side effects of long term antibiotic use can be profound. The eradication of good bacteria in the intestinal lining can harm the digestive system, immune system, liver, hormone balancing mechanisms and more. Meanwhile, the underlying cause of the acne has never been addressed and the patient has not been able to respond to this important signal from the body that something is out of balance. Symptoms are an intelligent alarm bell from the body and when symptoms are simply suppressed, health will inevitably decline.

The naturopathic approach to skin conditions is to support the key systems of the body that promote detoxification and to restore balance. When the body is overloaded with toxins, they come out the skin and provoke inflammation which results in a myriad of skin conditions from acne to hives.

The liver is the key organ for detoxifying chemicals, eliminating hormones, promoting digestive juices and much more. In all ancient systems of medicine, promoting optimal liver function is a fundamental part of resolving skin conditions. For example, the influx of hormones at puberty will be more likely to cause acne if the liver is not able to regulate the elimination of hormones. Liver support and hormone balancing are key aspects of the naturopathic treatment of acne.

The colon is another organ of elimination that must be looked at in order to truly cure a skin condition. Constipation, candida yeast overgrowth from antibiotic use, and food allergies are potential causes of skin conditions. I have helped hundreds of people resolve skin problems by testing them for food allergies with a very sensitive and non-invasive allergy testing method and then coaching them on an allergy free diet. It is so rewarding to see a child's eczema clear up in a couple of weeks or an adult's life long psoriasis diminish in a couple of months after a simple shift in diet.

My naturopathic approach to skin health also includes coaching patients to eat a whole food diet, ensure optimal hydration, and reduce stress. Stress management is important due to the connection between the stress hormone cortisol and inflammation in the skin. It is no coincidence that people often bemoan the arrival of a big zit on their wedding day!

Don't put up with simply managing your symptoms with side-effect laden drugs. Learn what your body is trying to tell you about your skin symptoms. The naturopathic approach takes time and patience, but the benefits go far beyond skin deep. Because we are cleansing and balancing the whole body, people report increased energy, mental clarity and the resolution of many other health issues as a "side-benefit" of this approach. Your long term health will be the greatest reward for your investment.

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