

Evidence summary

Chinese medicine for atopic dermatitis

This summary of key findings from *Volume 16: Atopic dermatitis*¹ of the Evidence-based Clinical Chinese Medicine monograph series outlines:

- what atopic dermatitis is
- current treatments
- findings from research into classical Chinese medicine literature and modern Chinese medicine clinical studies.

What is atopic dermatitis?

Atopic dermatitis (atopic eczema) is a red skin rash that appears spontaneously during childhood and often continues into adulthood.² Skin may be dry, weeping or crusted,² and usually itchy. The rash may come and go.³

Current treatments

When skin has no lesions or is dry, people with atopic dermatitis are given information about the condition, how to care for their skin and avoid known triggers.⁴

Mild atopic dermatitis is managed with topical treatments, like steroid creams or ointments.² Moderate atopic dermatitis is managed with stronger topical treatments, and severe rashes are managed with treatments targeting the immune system.^{4,5}

Chinese medicine treatments include oral and topical Chinese herbal medicine, body or ear acupuncture, moxibustion, *tuina* (Chinese massage), plum-blossom needle therapy, and dietary and lifestyle advice. Chinese medicine practitioners base their treatments on the patient's symptoms, relevant clinical textbooks and guidelines, research and clinical experience.

Classical Chinese medicine literature

The *Encyclopedia of Traditional Chinese Medicine (Zhong Hua Yi Dian)* is a large and important collection of Chinese medicine books. It includes 527 citations that describe skin lesions that resemble atopic dermatitis. Among these, 268 of the 271 citations that described a treatment for skin lesions mentioned Chinese herbal medicine. Three citations mentioned using acupuncture or pricking the skin.

Modified *Xiao feng san*, modified *Dang gui yin zi* and acupuncture were the only Chinese medicine treatments found in the *Encyclopedia of Traditional Chinese Medicine*, clinical textbooks and guidelines and modern clinical studies.

Modern Chinese medicine clinical studies

To write the *Atopic dermatitis*¹ monograph, nine biomedical databases (five English-language and four Chinese-language) were searched in January 2017. This search identified 162 relevant studies (91 randomised controlled trials, 11 non-randomised controlled clinical trials and 60 non-controlled studies).

An additional search of the International Clinical Trials Registry Platform in June 2022 identified six new relevant registered randomised controlled trials.

Chinese herbal medicine

Most studies (51) were randomised controlled trials of oral Chinese herbal medicine. Twenty-four studies were randomised controlled trials of topical Chinese herbal medicine.

Oral Chinese herbal medicine used alone or with conventional medicine was more effective than conventional medicine alone in improving clinician-assessed rash

appearance and reducing chance of it recurring. It is unclear whether oral Chinese herbal medicine is more effective than conventional medicine in patient-reported symptoms or quality of life. Topical Chinese herbal medicine was no better than conventional medicine in improving clinician-assessed rash appearance when used alone, but was more effective in improving clinician-assessed rash appearance when combined with conventional medicine.

People who received oral Chinese herbal medicine reported slightly more adverse effects than people who received conventional medicine or placebo. Conversely, people who received topical Chinese herbal medicine reported fewer adverse events than people who received conventional medicine.

Results from new registered randomised controlled trials of Chinese herbal medicine varied. Some studies showed that combining oral Chinese herbal medicine and conventional medicine improved atopic dermatitis severity more effectively than placebo plus conventional medicine, while others showed no difference between oral Chinese herbal medicine and placebo.

Topical Chinese herbal medicine was more effective than placebo in reducing atopic dermatitis severity, but it is unclear whether it improves other outcomes.

Acupuncture and related therapies

The original database search found six relevant studies of acupuncture therapies for atopic dermatitis, three of which were randomised controlled trials. These studies gave insufficient information about acupuncture's effect on atopic dermatitis signs and symptoms.

One new relevant registered randomised controlled trial of acupuncture for atopic dermatitis was identified since 2017. It showed acupuncture treatment three times weekly was more effective than twice weekly, but the study was small.

Key messages

- Chinese medicine treatments have been used throughout history to treat atopic dermatitis-like skin conditions.
- Some treatment approaches have changed over time.
- Oral and topical Chinese herbal medicine may improve symptoms when used alone or with conventional medicines.
- It is unclear whether acupuncture improves atopic dermatitis.
- Clinicians and patients should discuss potential risks and benefits, so patients can make informed choices about care.

For more information

You can find out more about Chinese medicine for atopic dermatitis in the book *Evidence-based Clinical Chinese Medicine Volume 16: Atopic dermatitis*¹ from <https://doi.org/10.1142/11440>

To find out more about Chinese medicine research at the China–Australia International Centre for Chinese Medicine, visit www.rmit.edu.au/research/centres-collaborations/multi-partner-collaborations/cairccm

References

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Disclaimer

This evidence summary is not intended as a guide for self-medication or medical advice – patients should seek professional advice from qualified Chinese medicine practitioners.