

Treatment by Acupuncture

INFANTILE ECZEMA

by Julian Scott

The treatment of infantile eczema is, for the acupuncturist, both very simple and very complicated. It is very simple in that there is only a small number of points which are useful, and complicated in that it is often difficult both to diagnose, and to elucidate the cause, whether physical or emotional, due to immunisation etc. In addition, the response to acupuncture is very variable, with some children being cured almost instantly, and others, after a promising start, never seeming to get completely better.

Description

The word eczema is used to describe a wide variety of complaints. When mild, there may be roughening of the skin texture, so that the baby's skin, instead of feeling soft and smooth, feels like sandpaper. This may just be in one part of the body, commonly the upper part of the back, or the insides of the elbows and the back of the knees*. At this stage there is no discomfort to the baby or child, and it is primarily the concern of the parents that the eczema might develop which provides the impulse for the child to be brought for treatment.

When the eczema is more severe, the skin is not just rough, but becomes flaky as well, with a fine powder or small flakes coming off when the skin is rubbed. Likewise, the affected area tends to increase, the wrists and ankles being the next most commonly affected parts, leading on to the whole of the arms and legs.

Additional Symptoms

There are three common symptoms which may accompany the eczema as described - heat, weeping and itching. One, two or all three of these extra symptoms may be present.

Heat

Quite often the affected area becomes hot and red. Although quite hot to the touch, however, because of the heat lost in this way, the child may actually feel cold. Less commonly, the child may show signs of systemic heat with restlessness, irritability, shouting and insomnia, as well as being bright red all over and hot to touch. [This pattern sometimes appears shortly after an immunisation].

Weeping

When the affected area is rubbed and flakes come off, it is often found that a clear or pale yellow fluid oozes out. In some cases, even without rubbing, the affected area will be moist - especially if the eczema appears in the

*Sometimes the rough or powdery area appears on one or other cheek. If this happens, with few signs elsewhere in the body, the child should be checked for intestinal worms.

folds of flesh in a chubby child.

Itching

Itching is the one symptom which causes more distress than all the others. There seem to be two types - a deep type and a superficial one. With the deep type, the child will scratch and scratch until blood appears. Even then, although there may be blood oozing out of the affected areas (maybe the whole of the arms and legs) the child is still very disturbed and will continue to scratch, without any apparent relief.

With the more superficial itch, the child may go on scratching until blood is drawn, but shortly after that, stops scratching. Generally the child is less distressed.

Aggravations

The heat and weeping do not change very much through the day. By contrast, the itching can change from minute to minute. In some children an unpleasant thought (such as impending acupuncture treatment) can send them into a paroxysm of scratching. In other children it may be the consumption of certain foods which starts it off; while others may itch at specific times (especially the small hours of the night).

Emotional Disturbances

There do not seem to be any special emotional characteristics to eczema. It may appear in sweet tempered, happy, sad, aggressive, shy or fearful children. The only emotion in common is the distress associated with severe itching.

It often happens, however, that the temper of the child changes markedly during treatment, with sweet children becoming more assertive, happy children more serene, sad children more happy, and so on. This observation is quite important in understanding eczema, and shows why the child's response to treatment is so variable. The origin of eczema may either be predominantly physical or else due to the child's reaction to emotional stress. In either case, whether the emotions affect the body or the body affects the emotions, there will be emotional changes - aggression, repression, overly sweet behaviour, martyrdom etc. Sometimes the child even seems nicer when it has eczema because it manages to hide a savage streak. If the problem is mainly physical then it is relatively easy to cure. On the other hand, if the child is rewarded for being "nice", it may well go on suppressing its "nasty" feelings. Thus whilst acupuncture is effective at regulating the Qi in the body, its effect on changing behavioural patterns is less certain and this accounts for the rather unpredictable effect of acupuncture.

AETIOLOGY AND PATHOLOGY

The root cause of eczema is the accumulation of phlegm-damp in the skin. As a result, the skin is not properly nourished, and so loses its flexibility and becomes hard and flaky. One sees the same forces at work in old people, especially those who have had a stroke, when the phlegm causes the skin on their legs to become flaky and powdery.

In the Chinese texts there are two major classifications of infantile eczema: 'wet eczema' and 'dry eczema'. These two correspond to the extreme manifestation of phlegm-damp. If the phlegm aspect of the phlegm-damp is more pronounced than the damp, then the eczema is of the dry type. If the damp aspect of the phlegm-damp is more pronounced than the phlegm then the eczema is of the wet type. One can see the same range of symptoms in children's coughs which are rather hard and non-productive when the phlegm-damp in the lungs is thick and viscous, whilst they are wet and productive when the phlegm-damp in the lungs is watery.

Causes of phlegm-damp affecting the skin

Heredity

It is well known that eczema (and asthma) runs in families. It is often found that children in these families have skin problems. Generally speaking, it should be seen as an encouraging sign that a child gets a skin problem, which manifests on the exterior and is therefore relatively yang, rather than its yin relation asthma. Strangely, many parents regard asthma as the lesser of the two problems for it does not show in the skin, so cannot easily be seen. Moreover, the symptoms of asthma can be quickly relieved by a puff of inhaler, but very little seems to relieve the persistent irritation of eczema.

Lung dysfunction

That "the Lungs rule the skin" is one of the axioms of TCM. If a child has any chronic problem of the Lungs, then the descending and dispersing of fluids becomes impaired, and fluids can accumulate in the skin. Over a period of time these stagnant fluids transform to phlegm-damp, and may be the cause of eczema. The commonest pattern of Lung disorder causing eczema is that of 'lingering pathogenic factor', where a child has a Lung illness that has never been completely cured. This is often accompanied by swollen glands in the neck.

Spleen dysfunction

According to the TCM saying, "The Spleen is the generator of phlegm, the Lungs are the container of phlegm". By far the most common cause of phlegm in children is a dysfunction of the Spleen. This may be because the Spleen is a little weak and there is difficulty in digesting foods (especially cow's milk and cheese) or else the child may be taking food which the Spleen simply cannot digest (such as oranges), a condition which would be called allergic. A more common cause is Accumulation Disorder (as described in JCM 42, May 1993).

Causes of the associated symptoms

Heat

The heat seen in eczema is usually caused by local stagnation of Qi, blood or fluids, according to the TCM

saying that 'stagnation transforms to heat', and may often have its origin in internal cold. It is a common misunderstanding that the heat in eczema is caused by heat in the blood. This is only rarely the case, even when the heat fills the whole body. Much more commonly, the child actually has a cold digestion, and it is only the local stagnation which leads to heat.

Weeping

The symptom of oozing fluid is a natural result of the accumulation of damp under the skin.

Itching

According to TCM texts, itching is caused by stagnation of blood. In practice, in children, in whom the blood normally flows very freely, the itching originates in stagnation of Qi which then leads to temporary stagnation of blood. In adults, when talking of stagnation of Qi, one immediately thinks of the Liver, because of its relation to the free flow of Qi, and indeed in some children, there really is a dysfunction of the Liver. However, this is comparatively rare. In practice, the stagnation is commonly caused by stagnation of food, as in Accumulation Disorder.

Alternatively, the stagnation of blood may come from the Heart which both rules the blood and houses the Shen. Any disturbance of the Shen can cause a disturbance in the Heart, and thus in the flow of blood. By this mechanism, disturbing thoughts and emotions can have an immediate effect on itching.

DIFFERENTIATION OF SYNDROMES

There are two bases on which differentiation can be made. One relates to the nature of the phlegm-damp that has accumulated in the skin, and the other, a completely separate differentiation which can be made at the same time, relates to the origin of the phlegm. It could be said that the nature of the phlegm is the Biao (manifestation) while the cause of the phlegm is the Ben (root).

Differentiation according to the nature of the phlegm-damp

As discussed above, phlegm-damp can be wetter or drier and therefore the basic differentiation is between the Wet-type and the Dry-type. This is the most common differentiation given in the books on TCM paediatrics which are usually based on herbal treatment, this differentiation being relatively more important when herbs are prescribed.

Wet-type

- rash appears in raised mounds with small watery pustules that ooze a bright transparent fluid; in severe cases it becomes purulent
- after drying, a yellow crusty scab forms
- there is often much itching, and the child clings to its mother's clothes, or tries to take its own clothes off
- the child often moans
- restless sleep

Dry-type

- pools of red rash on the skin surface, not particularly brightly coloured
- rash may be raised in mounds or in scattered dots, or concentrated in one place

- rash sheds white scales
- little or no exudate

Differentiation based on the cause of the phlegm-damp

There are three commonly seen patterns - Lingering Pathogenic Factor, Accumulation Disorder, and Accumulation Disorder with Greed. These differentiations are relatively more important for acupuncturists, since the treatment of Lingering Pathogenic Factor is significantly different to that for Accumulation Disorder and Accumulation Disorder with Greed, whilst the treatment of these last two patterns - although essentially similar - have a significant difference in the use of the point Neiting ST-44 in the latter. These differentiations are based on observation in clinics in England, and do not appear in Chinese books.

Lingering Pathogenic Factor

Here the phlegm arises as a result of a pathogenic factor which invades the Lungs, and is not completely cleared. The pattern is a mixture of Xu and Shi. It is Xu because there is always some Lung weakness, usually a hereditary weakness of the Lung zang. This weakness, however, is not extreme, since if it were the condition would be more likely to manifest as asthma. The condition also has a significant Shi aspect because of the Lingering Pathogenic Factor, This is not an active pathogenic factor, but is dormant and resides in the channels, preventing the normal circulation of Qi and fluids. The stagnant fluids then transform to phlegm, giving rise to phlegm-damp which remains in the channels and collaterals near the skin.

Clinical manifestations:

- the child usually has a pale or white face
- the skin appears thin and translucent (wet type) or grey (dry type)
- often there are 'shadows' around the eyes
- the glands in the neck are swollen; in the 'wet' type, the glands under the ears are large and soft; in the 'dry' type they tend to be smaller and harder, and there are often small hard lumps on the side of the neck (in the region of Futu L.I.-18)
- there is a history of repeated infections
- the appetite is normal or poor
- the stools are normal, or slightly loose
- there is often a white or clear nasal discharge

Pulse: usually deep and soggy (Ru) in wet-type; slippery or thready in dry-type

Accumulation Disorder

In this pattern, the main problem is that the digestion is disturbed. It does not rule out the possibility of a Lingering Pathogenic Factor, but the really important thing is that the digestive disturbance means that the Spleen is injured by the retained food, disturbing its function of transforming and transporting fluids, which then accumulate and transform to phlegm-damp. If the digestion is disturbed, it must first be regulated before considering treating the Lingering Pathogenic Factor. The causes of Accumulation Disorder are over-eating, unsuitable food, rough food (such as brown rice, brown bread etc.), raw or undercooked food, irregular eating (a lot at one time of day and nothing at another), demand feeding, and food which the child cannot digest or to which it is

allergic. More explanation and details of this disorder are given in JCM No. 42 and the textbook *Acupuncture in the Treatment of Children*.

Clinical manifestations:

- the child is strong
- red cheeks, greenish around the mouth
- green nasal discharge
- swollen abdomen
- irregular stools (constipated one day, diarrhoea the next)
- foul smelling stools, or stools that smell of fermenting apples
- facial skin may be yellow (or if there is additional Lung weakness it will be yellow in one part, and white on the forehead)

Pulse: full, slippery. If there is a lot of water accumulation the pulse may be deep.

Accumulation Disorder with Greed

The symptoms are the same as for Accumulation Disorder, but there is the additional symptom of greed. The difference this makes in clinical practice is that the greed must be treated at the same time as the Accumulation Disorder. As we have seen, one of the causes of Accumulation Disorder is over-eating. If the accumulation is cleared, but the child goes on eating as before, then the pattern will soon return. The greed normally comes from Stomach Heat (which may in turn come from an immunisation, or from the mother in pregnancy), although sometimes the greed is part of the essential nature of the child. Stomach heat can be effectively cleared with acupuncture, but essential greed can only be overcome by patient teaching from the parents.

Clinical manifestations:

As for accumulation disorder plus:

- the child often has a large mouth
- the whole face may be red
- the child may perspire on the forehead after meals.

TREATMENT

Treatment given once or twice a week is usually effective. The points given below are suggestions to guide treatment. The number of points used varies from practitioner to practitioner. As a rule, we try to limit the treatment to two or three points used bilaterally, making four or six insertions. As will be seen, the results of treatment are very variable. This is because of the emotional content in the cause of eczema.

Lingering Pathogenic Factor

The purpose of treatment is to clear the lingering Pathogenic Factor. Points of use are:

Taiyuan LU-9

Chize LU -5

Quchi L.I.-11

Fenglong ST-40

If there are signs that the pathogenic factor is hot (such as red tongue, red lips, allergy to animal hair), additional points may be helpful, such as:

Taichong LIV-3

Shaofu HE-8

Hegu L.I.-4

If the child is very weak, these points may be alternated

with:
Feishu BL-13
Pishu BL-20
Shenshu BL-23

Results of treatment

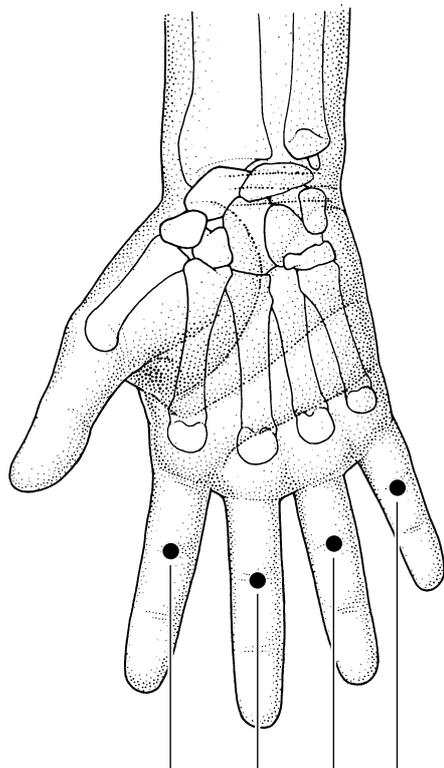
The results are very variable. There is no clear pattern to the course of treatment. Sometimes there is aggravation after treatment, sometimes not. Sometimes they get better over the first five treatments, and then have an inexplicable relapse. Provided treatment can be continued, and the parents do not lose heart when this happens, then there is a good chance of a cure. One very striking feature is a change in the mood of the child. Aggressive children become more gentle, docile children more assertive, and so on. When this happens, it should be taken as a sign that real lasting changes are taking place.

Number of treatments

I think that all children receive some benefit. The great majority show improvement to the point that the eczema is no longer a problem. Perhaps half of all patients treated are completely cured, with the rest suffering occasional slight relapses, especially when there is extra stress in their life.

Accumulation Disorder

The main purpose of treatment is to clear the accumulated food. The primary point for this is Sifeng (Extra), needled unilaterally, selecting alternate hands at each treatment. The four points on each hand are pricked with the triangular or a broad gauge needle so that a few drops of blood are drawn. Sifeng should not be used more frequently than once every three to four days.



Sifeng (M-UE-9)

Other points:
Zusanli ST-36
Zhongwan REN-12
Quchi L.I.-11

These points should be treated with the method of moving the Qi. This is not tonifying and not dispersing, but moves the Qi. The Qi sensation should travel up the limb (for Zusanli ST-36 and Quchi L.I.-11) or across the abdomen (for Zhongwan REN-12).

Results of treatment

During the first 24 hours after treatment one can expect a huge discharge of foul smelling stools. During this time, and for most of the following week, the skin condition can be greatly aggravated and the child can show signs of great distress and anger. The parents should be warned of this. It is sometimes wise to use points on the limbs (rather than Zhongwan REN-12 or Sifeng), for the first few treatments, as these points are somewhat milder in their action, and the reaction is consequently less. As a guideline, the stronger the condition (e.g. very red face, very swollen abdomen, lots of catarrh) the stronger the reaction is likely to be.

Number of treatments

If the child shows very clear symptoms of Accumulation Disorder, then the eczema can be completely cured after about six treatments. In practice, however, it is uncommon to see such a clear-cut pattern, and consequently it can take many more treatments. Sometimes it is very hard to get rid of the symptoms altogether.

Accumulation disorder with Greed

The principle of treatment is to clear the accumulated food and clear Stomach heat. The points used are the same as for Accumulation Disorder, with the addition of Neiting ST-44.

Results of treatment

The results of treatment are very similar to those of Accumulation Disorder. The parents should always be asked about the progress that is being made in reducing the amount the child is eating.

Wet/Dry

The above treatments are appropriate for the wet type. In the dry type, there is an additional problem of softening the hard phlegm. This is rather a slow process, taking many months, even in a toddler. Consequently herbs are favoured over acupuncture for this. If herbs are not available, then the treatments above should be alternated with:

Bailao (Extra), Ganshu BL-18, Pishu BL-20

Treatment of symptoms

Heat

There is no special local treatment for the heat caused by local stagnation. The points given above should be adequate.

Weeping

It is sometimes helpful to use points on the Spleen channel, such as:

Xuehai SP-10
Yinlingquan SP-9
Sanyinjiao SP-6

Itching

This symptom is due to an irritated Shen, so points should be chosen which calm the Shen, such as:

Shenmen HE-7
Fenglong ST-40
Xuehai SP-10
Sanyinjiao SP-6

Other related conditions

There are two related conditions which may occur with the eczema, or may appear when the eczema is treated. These are i) raised papules and ii) small red maculae.

Raised papules

Sometimes, in addition to the eczema, there are small raised red mounds, not unlike the spots of chicken pox, or small red boils. Like the spots of chicken pox, they may ooze fluid. In severe conditions these may become infected, and really endanger the health of the child [when this occurs it is usually diagnosed as impetigo]. These spots may appear in the area of the eczema, or may appear elsewhere on the body, and are caused by damp-heat in the system, and are indeed very closely related to chicken-pox. When these spots appear during treatment, it is a very good sign, for it means that when - and if - the child gets chicken pox, it will be a comparatively mild attack, because most of the damp-heat has been cleared.

Small red maculae

During the course of treatment, the child may come out in small red dots covering most of the body especially the trunk. They usually do not itch, so they do not cause the child much distress and are just unsightly, but they may persist for several months, with the child being a bit irritable. This is caused by heat-poison in the blood. This heat-poison comes from the Heart* and is present in every child when they are born. It is the same heat-poison that is expelled when a child has measles, and in fact when the spots appear in this way, it is as though the child is having a long drawn out attack of measles, without the fever. They may even become photosensitive. This sort of skin reaction appears to be more common now that children routinely have measles immunisation, and now that febrile diseases are so quickly treated with antibiotics. The normal route for the poisons to be expelled is blocked, so the body finds a different one.

Raised papules

The points given above are helpful for this. In addition, points to clear damp-heat may be used, such as:

Ququan LIV-8
Yinlingquan SP-9

If there is danger of the papules becoming infected, then local points and points along the channel should be used, and treatment given every day.

Maculae

The most helpful points seem to be those that treat the

Liver. In particular:

Lingtai DU-10
Ganshu BL-18
Taichong LIV-3

Advice to the parents

A change of diet is often necessary:

- Cow's milk and cheese, peanut butter and bananas should be excluded from the diet as they are all conducive to the formation of phlegm.
- Colourings, flavourings and preservatives should be excluded from the diet.
- Sugar intake should be kept to a minimum.
- Often the child has some food allergy. This can be quite hard to discover. Watch out especially for chocolate, chicken, eggs and oranges.

If there are signs of Accumulation Disorder, the advice given in the previous article (JCM 42) should be followed. In particular:

- Avoid rough foods such as whole grains and whole grain products, raw foods, fibrous foods.
- Give regular meals / feeds, with no snacks in-between.
- Make sure the child is not being fed too much.

Ointments

Steroid ointments should be avoided if possible, for there is little doubt that in the long term they aggravate the skin condition. On the whole the parents are aware of this. It is a good idea not to be too rigid, however, for the occasional use of these ointments can give the child the chance of a good night's sleep without being woken by intolerable itching. This can make a big difference to the health of the child.

There are herbal preparations which can reduce itching. The Western herb used for this is Heartsease (*Viola tricolor*), applied in powder form for the wet type, and in a base of sunflower oil for the dry type.

*[Heat poison in the Heart is equivalent to the Western idea of inflammation of the spinal cord. In an acute attack, the delirium and coma of a high fever would be called pathogenic heat invading the Pericardium in TCM, and inflammation of the brain and spinal cord in Western Medicine. In this case we are referring to the 'poison' which is present in the system at birth. (Acupuncture in the Treatment of Children)].