

# Research Advances in Traditional Chinese Medicine External Therapies for Eczema Treatment

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**Abstract:** Eczema, a common dermatological condition, is understood in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) as primarily arising from external pathogenic factors and internal organ disharmony. TCM external therapies, based on the principles of unblocking meridians and regulating qi and blood, directly target affected areas through methods such as herbal poultices, soaking, gua sha, cupping, and fumigation. These approaches exert effects including clearing heat, dispelling dampness, promoting blood circulation, and relieving itching, offering advantages of minimal side effects and high specificity. Recent clinical studies indicate these methods significantly alleviate eczema symptoms, reduce recurrence, and improve patients' quality of life. Their mechanisms involve immune regulation, inflammation suppression, and skin repair promotion, establishing them as promising approaches in eczema treatment.

**Keywords:** Traditional Chinese Medicine External Therapies; Eczema Treatment; Clinical Research

## 1. Analysis of TCM Etiology and Pathogenesis of Eczema

From a TCM perspective, eczema arises from external pathogens (dampness, heat, wind, cold, etc.) invading the body surface or from visceral dysfunction (such as spleen deficiency with dampness accumulation or liver qi stagnation). These conditions lead to a series of visceral imbalances, manifesting as skin changes. For instance: - Dampness invasion: Excessive dampness obstructs the skin surface, manifesting as exudation or eczema lesions—typical early symptoms. - Wind invasion: Wind pathogens, variable with climate, often induce eczema itching by disrupting qi and blood circulation, leading to skin dehydration, redness, swelling, and itching.

Heat accumulation: When heat pathogens trigger eczema, affected areas often exhibit redness, swelling, heat pain, and itching. Internally generated heat can also deplete yin fluids, causing dry, flaky skin. Spleen deficiency with dampness accumulation: Spleen deficiency generates dampness, which obstructs qi and blood circulation, predisposing to recurrent eczema. Blood deficiency with wind-dryness: Insufficient blood fails to moisturize the skin, leading to dryness, itching, and excessive flaking.

By adhering to the principle of syndrome differentiation and treatment, external TCM therapies regulate bodily functions through methods such as clearing heat, dispelling dampness, promoting blood circulation, and resolving stasis, thereby achieving eczema treatment.

## 2. Fundamental Principles of External TCM Therapies

The core principle of TCM external therapies lies in stimulating the body's self-healing capacity through external interventions. This involves unblocking meridians, regulating qi and blood, improving local microcirculation, and enhancing skin immunity and barrier function to alleviate symptoms and cure diseases.

When applied topically, herbal medicines are absorbed through the skin, directly targeting affected areas to exert effects such as clearing heat and detoxifying, dispelling dampness and relieving itching, and promoting blood circulation to resolve stasis. External therapies like massage, cupping, and gua sha stimulate specific acupoints or meridians on the skin surface to regulate qi and blood, unblock meridians, and enhance local immunity. Techniques such as local massage and fumigation promote blood circulation, aid toxin elimination, and alleviate eczema symptoms. Compared to oral medications, TCM external

therapies typically carry fewer side effects, reducing the risk of systemic drug-related complications.

### **3. Application of TCM External Therapies in Eczema Treatment**

#### **3.1 Herbal Poultice Therapy**

This therapy involves grinding medicinal herbs into powder, mixing them with lead powder, and pounding the mixture into a thick paste or ointment. This is then formed into medicinal cakes or poultice packs and applied directly to the affected area. The herbs penetrate the skin to exert effects such as clearing heat and detoxifying, dispelling dampness and relieving itching, reducing swelling, and alleviating pain. Herbs commonly used for eczema treatment, such as lithospermum, phellodendron, and sophora, demonstrate good therapeutic efficacy. For instance, lithospermum clears heat, cools the blood, promotes blood circulation, and resolves stasis, effectively treating eczema with redness, swelling, and itching. Phellodendron clears heat and dries dampness, effectively eliminating damp-heat pathogens in eczema.

#### **3.2 Chinese Herbal Soaking Therapy**

This therapy involves decocting herbs with heat-clearing, toxin-eliminating, dampness-removing, and itch-relieving properties. The affected area is then immersed in the herbal solution to achieve therapeutic effects. This method aims to reduce eczema lesions, alleviate itching, and diminish redness and inflammation. Commonly used herbs in this therapy include *Sophora flavescens*, *Coptis chinensis*, and dandelion, all possessing potent anti-inflammatory properties. *Sophora flavescens* clears heat and dries dampness, *Coptis chinensis* exhibits antibacterial and anti-inflammatory effects, while dandelion clears heat, detoxifies, and promotes diuresis to reduce swelling. The combined application of these herbs alleviates eczema inflammation and relieves symptoms.

#### **3.3 Gua Sha Therapy**

Gua Sha therapy involves scraping the skin surface with tools like gua sha boards to stimulate local meridians. This promotes smooth qi and blood circulation, alleviating itching and discomfort caused by eczema—particularly crucial during acute

phases. For severe eczema, gua sha accelerates local qi and blood flow to reduce symptoms. Different gua sha techniques can be selected based on individual conditions, such as simple scraping or combining scraping with herbal preparations to enhance efficacy.

#### **3.4 Cupping Therapy**

Applying cupping to eczema-affected areas stimulates local qi and blood circulation, enhances blood flow, and exerts heat-clearing, dampness-expelling, and itch-relieving effects. This is suitable for individuals with chronic, difficult-to-treat eczema that recurs frequently. Cupping also aids in expelling internal damp-heat, regulates qi and blood flow, prevents eczema recurrence, and enhances the body's immunity and skin self-repair capabilities, significantly reducing relapse rates. During treatment, patients should actively cooperate, which will gradually improve their condition and alleviate psychological stress.

#### **3.5 Medicated Steam Therapy**

For ancient Chinese practitioners, medicated steam therapy was a therapeutic method. It involved preparing herbal medicine packets, allowing the generated steam to penetrate the skin surface and treat the affected area. Common herbs used for fumigation include honeysuckle, chrysanthemum, and mint, which possess properties to clear heat, detoxify, reduce swelling, and relieve pain. Honeysuckle exhibits potent anti-inflammatory effects, proving highly effective for eczema by reducing swelling and alleviating pain. Chrysanthemum clears heat, detoxifies, and disperses wind-heat. Mint reduces swelling, relieves itching, and provides a cooling effect.

#### **3.6 Plum Blossom Needle**

The plum blossom needle therapy involves using a plum blossom needle on the Shu points of the patient's back. The practitioner uses finger tapping and flicking motions, moving vertically from top to bottom. The flicking is most concentrated on the thoracic and lumbar regions, continuing until the skin appears flushed. After each point is treated, the practitioner immediately moves to the next point, performing the actions at a relatively fast pace. This method has shown significant efficacy in treating eczema. Based on individual patient conditions, daily acupuncture is

recommended, with five consecutive sessions constituting one course. Typically, a minimum of five courses is required, while a maximum of 25 courses may be administered. with an average of 15 courses. Follow-up treatment was conducted on 28 clinical cases, with no recurrence observed in any patient after one year of treatment. The clinical cure rate reached 97.5%. This outcome primarily leverages the unique stimulating effect of the plum blossom needle, significantly improving local skin blood circulation and immune function. This accelerates the resolution of eczema lesions and the body's self-repair process, making it an important therapeutic approach for eczema.

### 3.7 Acupoint Implantation and Acupoint Injection

Acupoint thread implantation therapy is a novel treatment based on traditional acupuncture theory, involving the insertion of catgut sutures into acupoints. This method offers the advantage of replacing retained needles, significantly extending the duration of action compared to conventional acupuncture. By increasing stimulation intensity, it enhances therapeutic efficacy. Furthermore, the continuous stimulation from implanted threads induces stronger physiological responses to treat diseases, making it applicable for various chronic conditions. It demonstrates notable efficacy for dermatological disorders such as eczema.

### 3.8 Bloodletting Therapy

Bloodletting therapy involves puncturing the skin or acupoints with needles to draw out blood, expelling pathogenic heat toxins from the body to achieve recovery. By releasing harmful substances for natural elimination, it disperses pathological conditions to treat diseases. As a commonly employed TCM therapeutic method, bloodletting is clinically applied to treat various inflammatory and dermatological conditions. "Needle-cupping" combines bloodletting with cupping therapy: fine needles puncture acupoints or swollen areas to release blood, unblocking meridians, while cupping draws out pathogenic factors like dampness and wind pathogens. This combination dispels wind, eliminates dampness, and relieves itching, making it effective for eczema, rheumatic diseases, erysipelas, and mumps.

## 4. Conclusion

Recent clinical trials and experimental studies on TCM external therapies demonstrate their marked efficacy in treating eczema. Findings from randomized controlled trials (RCTs) and clinical observations indicate that these methods effectively alleviate eczema symptoms while improving patients' quality of life. For instance, some evidence confirms that herbal poultices significantly reduce itching, redness, swelling, and oozing in eczema patients. Combining topical and oral Chinese herbal medicine for comprehensive eczema treatment effectively prolongs remission periods. Furthermore, modern research has explored the mechanisms underlying TCM external therapies, suggesting they function through regulating immune responses, suppressing skin inflammation, and promoting skin cell repair. This has attracted attention and deeper investigation across multiple fields. With outstanding practical outcomes, these therapies have become a crucial approach in eczema treatment.

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