drinking the tea for one month, 74 (68%) of the 118 patients showed “marked to moderate improvement.” At the 6-month assessment, 64 patients (54%) showed a good response to the tea regimen. The researchers attribute the effect to “the antiallergic properties of tea polyphenols.”

The study came to my attention because of a letter to Joe and Terry Graedon’s (The People’s Pharmacy) newspaper column. The writer had suffered with nummular eczema (characterized by coin-shaped, red, itchy patches on the skin) for years. Benadryl, prednisone, and topical cortisone ointments had no effect. Within 24 hours of drinking oolong tea, the writer states that itching and inflammation disappeared and the lesions were gone within a few days.


Graedon, Joe & Terry. Oolong tea banishes bad skin problem in a couple of days. The Herald-Sun (Durham, NC) January 23, 2003

New Psoriasis Drug

A new drug to treat moderate-to-severe plaque psoriasis, called Amevide, gained FDA approval in January 2003. Amevide is manufactured by the biotechnology company Biogen, Inc. of Cambridge, Massachusetts. Treatment with Amevide entails a weekly injection for 12 weeks, costing $7,000 to $10,000 for each three-month treatment period. Two randomized, double-blind, placebo-controlled studies, involving 1600 people with chronic plaque psoriasis found that “a significantly higher percentage” of patients receiving Amevide showed a reduced damage in affected skin surface area and amount of scaling and inflammation compared to patients receiving a placebo. In addition to scaling and inflammation, people with plaque psoriasis can experience pain, itching, restricted joint motion, and emotional distress.

Unlike older drugs used to treat psoriasis, Amevide does not cause kidney or lung damage. It does, however, have an immunosuppressant effect. According to an FDA Talk Paper, “Amevide is believed to work by simultaneously blocking and reducing the cellular component of the immune system that is thought to play a role in the disease process.” The approved labeling for Amevide “encourages” doctors to tell patients that white blood cell counts should be monitored during therapy. Because the drug suppresses the immune system, patients may be more susceptible to infection or to developing a malignancy. The effect of Amevide on pregnancy and fetal development is unknown. The FDA asks doctors to enroll any women who become pregnant while receiving Amevide in the manufacturer’s pregnancy registry by calling 1-866-263-8483.


New psoriasis drug wins OK. The Herald-Sun (Durham, NC). February 1, 2003

Psoriasis

Psoriasis is a chronic, recurrent skin condition in which clearly-defined, raised plaques form. Although they do not tend to itch, these plaques look red and are covered with silvery scales that bleed easily. They usually appear on body prominences (knee, elbows, sacrum), scalp, external ears, nails (which may become pitted), eyebrows, back, buttocks and occasionally, torso. Plaques are created by epidermal cells that divide normally but complete the natural cycle from creation to shedding in 3 or 4 days, a much faster rate than the normal 28 days. The cause is unknown although many consider it an autoimmune condition. In some cases, plaque formation is accompanied by severe arthritis (psoriatic arthritis), similar to rheumatoid arthritis. Infection (especially upper respiratory), injury, stress, and a cold climate may worsen the condition or incite a flare-up. Interestingly, exposure to sunlight has alleviated the condition in many patients although one must be careful of UV rays and avoid burning the skin.

In his article on psoriasis, David L. Hoffman reports that herbal remedies for treating psoriasis are by no means clearcut: “Some people respond incredibly well to one herb whilst others show none at all.” Arctium lappa (burdock), Berberis aquilinum (mountain grape), Rumex crispus (yellow dock), and Similax spp. (sarsaparilla) – all of which are woody, hepatic alteratives are the most likely herbs to help this condition. Mr. Hoffman reports that diaphoretics used to increase circulation in the skin with the intention of improving skin health may stimulate cell replication and, thereby, aggravate the condition in some people.

Mr. Hoffman notes that mind-body, non-physical factors may be especially important for people with psoriasis. They may feel disfigured by the condition, resulting in depression and self-imposed social isolation. In addition, the label ‘psoriasis sufferer’ places one in a position of helpless victim. People with psoriasis need to be taught simple techniques for caring for their skin. For example, Uphold & Graham’s Clinical Guidelines in Adult Health advises soaking (not showering) for 10 minutes in tepid water (less than 90 degrees), gently patting the skin dry, and then applying moisturizers. Mr. Hoffman also emphasizes the need for stress management that includes a re-evaluation by the patient of life-style and personal goals.


Women & Stress

A UCLA study, published in Psychological Review (2000 July: 107(3): 411-29), determined that females of many species, including human, react differently to stress than males. The researchers, led by Shelly E. Taylor, analyzed hundreds of biological and behavioral stress studies, involving thousands of human and animal subjects. Rather than responding to stress with a “fight-or-flight” pattern of aggressive behavior or withdrawal, females protect and nurture their young during stressful conditions (the ‘tend’ response) and seek social contact and support from others, especially other females (the ‘befriend’ response). Among humans, ‘befriending’ may be as simple as asking for directions when lost or talking to friends or family on the phone.

Like the fight-or-flight response, the tend-and-befriend behavioral pattern correlates to specific biological changes. According to the UCLA researchers, the hormone oxytocin is the key factor in women’s response to stress. “Oxytocin has been studied largely for its role in childbirth, but it is also secreted in both men and women as a response to stress,” [Dr. Taylor] said. “Animals and people with high levels of oxytocin are calmer, more relaxed, more social and less anxious. In several animal species oxytocin leads to maternal behavior and to affiliation.” Although men also secrete oxytocin, male hormones such as testosterone seem to reduce its effect. Estrogen, however, apparently increases oxytocin’s effect. Ironically, women and female animals were excluded from stress research until the 1990s, according to Dr. Taylor, because researchers “believed that monthly fluctuations in hormones created stress responses that varied too widely to be considered statistically valid.” The tend and befriend response may account for the longer life span generally found among women as well as help explain why social connections increase longevity.

UCLA Researchers Identify Key Biobehavioral Pattern Used by Women to Manage Stress. www.college.ucla.edu/strress.htm

Wright, Virginia C., Ph.D. Women & Stress. www.nnamisc.org/Research/2202/ WomenStress.htm