



Atopic dermatitis

Atopic dermatitis - also known as *eczema* and *atopic eczema* - is a frequent skin disease. In Germany about three million people are affected and annually the number rises around 7%. Among experts atopic dermatitis is considered as incurable. Actually, however, there is a way to a therapy. Based on our experiences the therapy with Chinese medicine offers high prospects of complete recovery or at least of a clear amelioration.

Within chronic inflammatory illnesses atopic dermatitis takes a special position: the inflamed organ is visible and accessible from outside. A temptation for the therapist. The dermatologist resorts to agents which contain cortisone and which can be extrinsically applied. He then can just watch how the inflammation fades away. The patient for his part scratches until blood or lymph appears and feels how the itching diminishes. Both are common reactions which indeed do not offer a real therapeutic perspective, but nevertheless they can give hints on the inflammatory dynamic behind the eczema.

The fact that the illness appears visible on the skin surface is a chance for the diagnostician. With nothing else than his eyes he can observe the inflammation in its emergence and how it processes. This offers him the possibility to draw conclusions for the pathogenesis of the eczema by observing the morphology, the localization on the skin and the time elapses of its appearance. In each individual case he can easily follow the steps of the illness.

The eczema from the western and from the eastern point of view

There are few illnesses where the different concepts of western school medicine and Chinese medicine appear as clearly as in the case of atopic dermatitis. The western dermatology concentrates its attention almost completely on the skin. The inflammatory state of the skin serves as a direct origin for the use of immunosuppressive agents which usually are just locally adjusted.

In contrast, for the Chinese medicine the skin is not the delinquent of the immune disturbance atopic dermatitis but the victim. The eczema is regarded as a systemic disease. In this view the skin functions as a kind of pressure control valve used by the organism to get rid of inflammatory substances or processes which it is not able to cope with in any other kind of way. The skin inflammation is regarded as the tip of an iceberg which continuously goes on to regenerate after it once has been carried off. And indeed: after the employment of topistic, i.e. locally applied corticosteroids, the eczema reveals again either at the same spot, or at other spots as well, if it had been chased away from its former accustomed spots on the skin. Due to the rebound mechanism it happens that after the stop of the cortisone ointment a comeback of the eczema often is experienced more harassingly than ever before. It leads to constantly and repeated lubricating with grease and finally can entail physical dependence.

Suppressing the symptom which soon emerges again and again at new spots resembles a game lost already from the beginning. It only comes to an end if the skin has become atropic through the continuous ointment of cortison. Cadaverous from the treatment the skin lost together with its vitality the capability to represent eczematous processes as well. In many cases – particularly if patients have a predisposition for atopic diseases – the inflammation changes the target organ and typically switches from the skin to the mucous membranes of the respiratory system. Then chronic bronchial asthma or a pollinosis will be developed.

Pathogenesis of the illness from the sphere of the blood and the body fluids

After Chinese understanding, the reservoir from which the process, which causes eczematous, nurtures itself lies within the sphere of the blood and the body fluids (Chinese: "Xue"). Xue includes all kind of body fluids of the organism which are in constant movement and conversion. It includes all those substances which serve metabolically or immunologically to supply and to dispose the so called periphery of the organism.

If the sphere of body fluids stays in pathologic condition pushing again and again to discharge itself by bouts of eczematous the Chinese medicine speaks of "heat-humidity" or "cloudy heat". This means an inflammatory slugging, a state of overabundance which asks for cooling, humidity-converting and treatments draining the fluids. As a self-treatment the eczema carrying patient intuitively scratches himself until blood and lymph are released on the skin. By doing this he provides himself a short time alleviation thus confirming the pathology of "Xue overabundance".

Pathological state of overabundance

How develops this pathology? How is a "cloudy heat" generated inside the "Xue"? Children with atopic dermatitis give us the didactical most valuable contribution to answer this question. Those children frequently demonstrate the still fundamental relationship between respiratory infections and dermatitis: "Whenever the child has a cold, the eczema becomes more badly" says the mother. The bout is provoked particularly through respiratory infections which the organism did not properly purge. The child has a cold, but it doesn't cough and doesn't honk. The regular expelling of mucous through the nose and the bronchi misses completely or succeeds only insufficiently. The cold "goes inward" and strikes back in form of a bout of atopic dermatitis.

Of course, children who have problems to complete the complex process of defending an infect in the nick of time and at the appropriate part of their body are rather those being also sensitive and thin-skinned. Instead of relieving themselves with frequent sniffing and mucous expelling cough they shift the inflammable substances into the skin. That's nothing else than a desperate attempt of defense – much too late and using the wrong organ. In case of heat or inflammation caused by fever, the atopic dermatitis child still is able to release it through the skin. The same applies for the toxins of the measles. But in case of those substances which are responsible for the eczema, the mucous membranes have to be incorporated into the process of purging.

So to speak the basic constellation of the atopic dermatitis consists in a child who is susceptible for infectious diseases and also may have delimitation problems in a psychological manner. It fails to deal effectively with respiratory infections. Those kind of respiratory infections additionally are suppressed by the treatment with antibiotics. According to the terminology of the physician they are "arrested". Finally, the child develops spastic bronchitis and pollinosis.

Beside from this immuno-pathological basic structure of atopic dermatitis, the following illness-causing factors are from a rather obvious character and also largely recognized at least within the different fields of naturopathy. They are without any exception a matter of factors suitable to increase the “cloudy heat”:

- food: well-known promoters of eczematata are cheese, sugar and alcohol
- toxins, allergenes (e.g. pollen)
- stress factors which overstrain the internal efforts of processing and clearing the organism

Therapy

For an acute treatment of the atopic dermatitis bout, acupuncture and in particular also local bleeding can be helpful. But the treatment of choice of the endogenous eczema, which has a lasting effect by going deep to the roots of the disease, is clearly associated with the use of herbal ointments. Individually composed dispensings from raw drugs are applied as decoction. This method requires a diagnosis done in the manner of the Chinese medicine. Thereby, the anamnesis of the condition and feeling of the patient and his pre-infect history plays the central role. However, in the case of atopic dermatitis one will not be content using those given topics, but the diagnosis will be extended profitably by an analysis of the skin morphology.

The therapy then runs – simplified – in three periods which follow one after each other:

1. The relieve from inflammatory substances primarily over the intestine.
2. The reactivation of former respiratory infections and the training of the patient for a physiological effective infectious behaviour.
3. The reconstruction, the healing and the nutrition of the damaged skin and the mucous membranes.

Duration and success of the therapy depend primarily on the age of the patient and, understandably, on the duration and intensity of the anti-inflammatory pretreatment. In difficult cases, a stationary treatment has proven of value as an entrance into the therapy of atopic dermatitis with Chinese medicine.