

HOMEOPATHY

This is an increasingly popular form of complementary medicine available on the NHS. Dr Peter Fisher MRCP FFHom, consultant skin specialist at the Royal London Homeopathic Hospital, explains what it offers.

Every doctor dreads the situation: you are at a party, when somebody approaches you and asks, 'What's the homeopathic treatment for eczema (or asthma, indigestion or, worse still, Bloggs's syndrome, which you've never even heard of!). If I've had a hard day I reply, 'There's no homeopathic treatment for eczema', and leave it at that. But if I have been mellowed by a glass or two of wine, I go on: 'there isn't one homeopathic treatment for eczema, but there are several different homeopathic medicines that help different types of people with different kinds of eczema.'

This emphasises two key features of homeopathy - holism and individualisation -, which make a homeopathic consultation very different from a normal medical consultation. We always try to see each of our patients as an individual and a whole, not just a case of a certain disease. The aphorism 'We don't treat diseases, we treat sick people' sums it up.

Prescribing homeopathic treatment is in some ways the opposite of making a diagnosis. In making a diagnosis a doctor is saying to him/herself, 'Well, this is a case of eczema because it is an itchy rash that tends to blister, it affects particular parts of the body, is sensitive to specific substances, the blood tests show certain results', etc. The logical process is 'lumping together' - it is eczema because it has x, y, and z features in common with other cases which we know are eczema.

What kind of eczema? What kind of person?

This is where a homeopathic consultation becomes different. The homeopath thinks, 'Okay, so it's eczema, but what kind of eczema? And what kind of person has it?' I'm sure I don't have to tell the readers of Exchange that eczema is tremendously variable - not just in its severity, but in its type, and in the way that people cope, or sometimes fail to cope, with it.

The homeopath needs to know the details of the eczema. But he or she also takes into account other health problems and more general characteristics: the physical type, psychological make-up and so forth. The idea is not so much to cure the disease as to restore the body's balance, so that the body deals with the problem itself.

We always try to see the individual, his illness and life-situation as a whole. Homeopaths talk of 'pictures', meaning the overall pattern of the person and illness. What started it? Where is it? What makes it better or worse? What kind of person has it? How does he or she react to it? And so on ...

This is quite different from the conventional medical approach. My patients are sometimes puzzled at being asked all kinds of questions that seem to have nothing to do with their eczema. Small wonder that newcomers sometimes find homeopathy bewildering!

Some doctors, too, are hostile when their patients ask for homeopathic treatment. But GPs are much more favourable to homeopathy than many imagine: a survey showed that 80% trust homeopathy, and 37% sometimes use it in their own surgeries - so don't be afraid to ask your own doctor.

What is homeopathy?

Before getting too involved in the details, let's be sure that we know what homeopathy is. Homeopathy is the most misunderstood of all the 'complementary' therapies. Most readers of this article will have a fair idea of what acupuncture or osteopathy is, but may be unfamiliar with homeopathy, and how it differs from herbal medicine.

The basic idea of homeopathy is simple: 'Let like cure' (often expressed in Latin, *Similia similibus curentur*). What does this mean in practice? Take a simple example: angioedema, a common skin problem related to urticaria (nettle rash), causes swelling of the skin particularly of the eyelids, lips and tongue. The usual treatment is antihistamine tablets. The homeopath takes a quite different approach. Based on the idea of treating like with like, he looks for something that can cause similar symptoms. In this case we don't have to look far. Bee stings cause something similar - the sudden swelling, with relief from ice or cold bathing. So the most common homeopathic treatment for angioedema is bee sting! This doesn't mean that you have to be stung by a bee. Like all homeopathic medicines, it is prepared by specialist pharmacies as small white sugar tablets that you suck quite painlessly! The homeopathic preparation of bees is known as *Apis mellifica*, the Latin name for the honeybee.

At first sight, it seems strange to use something that can cause a similar problem. One would think that this would make matters worse. To understand it we need to look at some basic concepts in pharmacology. Most medicines work on a so-called 'key-and-lock' principle. For instance, histamine is a chemical that acts as a key - it fits into a receptor (the lock) on the surface of a cell, turning on processes inside the cell. Antihistamine drugs are like keys that don't quite fit. Instead of turning the lock, they jam it, preventing histamine from acting. Histamine, of course, is not the cause of the problem, just one step in a complex process.

Information medicine

Homeopathy is based on a different concept known as 'Information medicine'. If the model for the action of conventional drugs is the key and lock, the model for homeopathic medicines is the computer disk. The idea is to transmit information, to say to the body, 'Look, the problem is like the effects of a bee sting'.

Homeopathic medicines do sometimes cause a reaction, making matters worse before they get better. This is called an aggravation, and is particularly common in skin complaints (15-20% of patients). Because of aggravations, homeopaths reduced the size of their doses, using a process called 'potentisation'. Potentisation means diluting by stages of 1:10 or 1:100, with vigorous shaking. If you look at the homeopathic medicines in your local chemist (most now stock homeopathy), you will see that it says 6c or 6th centesimal dilution. This means that the original material - which is usually a herb but may be a chemical or mineral, or of- animal origin - has been diluted 1:100, six times over.

This method produces very high dilutions. There is a small amount of the starting material in a 6c medicine. Higher dilutions, such as 30c, which is in common use, contain no trace of the starting material at all!

The use of these very high dilutions is the main reason for scientific scepticism about homeopathy. The idea of information medicine comes in again here. If you gave a homeopathic medicine to a chemist and asked him to analyse it, he would tell you that it consisted only of water, alcohol (in which the dilutions are made) and sugar (from the tablets). If you gave the same chemist a computer disk, he would tell you it consisted

only of ferric oxide and vinyl. Your disk might contain the text of Hamlet, but you could only know this if you had the right computer and software to read it.

Three important homeopathic medicines for eczema with their local, mental and general features.

Arsenicum album

Arsenious trioxide, a deadly poison, but safe in homeopathic dilution.

- Local** Extensor. Distribution: often small rounded patches. Dry, very flaky. Very itchy, burns after scratching.
- Modalities** Worse in winter. Better from heat, warm bath.
- Mentals** Very anxious, terrible worrier. Tidy, fastidious, houseproud.
- General** Always feels cold. Restless when unwell.

Graphites

Pencil 'lead': in fact not lead at all, but a form of carbon.

- Local** Flexor. Distribution: skin folds and bends. Cracks, may ooze liquid when bad. Nails thickened, ridged.
- Modalities** Often worse before period in women.
- Mentals** Indecisive. Weepy, especially from sad news, music or sentimental films.
- General** Rather chilly.

Sulphur

Sulphur or brimstone, traditionally used for skin problems.

- Local** Extensor. Extremely itchy, burns, feels good to scratch. Scratches until it bleeds.
- Modalities** Worse from heat and in bed.
- Mentals** Assertive, argumentative, untidy. May be scruffy or flamboyant in dress.
- General** Hot, rarely feels cold. Hot, smelly feet. Loves spicy food.

The local symptoms of Sulphur and Arsenicum are similar, but the mentals and generals are opposite.

What to expect

That's enough theory! Let's look at some more practical questions. What should you expect, and how should you prepare if you are planning to consult a homeopath, or even considering treating yourself? It will certainly help if you observe your symptoms carefully.

Homeopaths divide symptoms into three groups: local, mental and general. The local symptoms apply directly to the disease. So, in the case of eczema: What is its character? How itchy is it? Does it crack, flake or ooze liquid, etc?

What is its distribution? Is it flexor (mostly in the bends and skin folds) or extensor (on the outer surfaces), or some other pattern? Psoriasis is commonly extensor and eczema often flexor. It is important for the homeopath to make a diagnosis so he can judge what is normal and what is unusual.

What, if anything, seemed to bring it on in the first place? Or have you had it as long as you can remember? Is it contact dermatitis, triggered by exposure? Or did it seem to come on or flare up after some major event in your life? And so on ...

Modalities

A modality is anything that makes it worse or better: is the itching worse or better in a hot environment, or from bathing? Is it affected by the weather, certain foods, or stress? Other health problems suffered by the same person may give a clue. Anything unusual is particularly interesting. For instance, the association of eczema with asthma or hay fever is common and therefore less interesting (although important to know) than an apparently unrelated disease suffered by the same person.

Not all in the mind

Sometimes patients get upset when I start asking about their mental and emotional state. They think I am implying that their problem is 'all in the mind'. But this is not the reason for asking these questions. It is because we are treating people, not diseases. The mental symptoms often give the clue to a successful prescription, especially when the local symptoms don't include any unusual characteristics.

The skin has a limited range of reactions: it can itch, flake, crack and form various kinds of rashes and spots. So the skin alone often doesn't give enough information to select from the large number of homeopathic medicines. The range of personalities and reactions to illness is virtually infinite. One person will react to an annoying skin rash with irritability. Another will turn it inwards, becoming depressed, while another simply copes.

And finally, the 'generals': Are you an 'owl' or a 'lark'? (i.e. is your natural rhythm to get up late and go to bed late or vice versa). Are you a chilly or hot-blooded mortal? Do you sleep well? etc.

Will it help me?

How much should you hope for from homeopathy? It is certainly not a panacea but we can do something for most people with eczema. Because homeopathy works by stimulating the body's self-healing processes, a lot depends on how long you have had eczema, how bad it is, and how much treatment you have had in the past. Children often do very well. Adults, who have had eczema for many years and used a lot of steroid creams, do less well.

Homeopathy is quite slow, in long-standing cases. We sometimes say, 'a month's treatment for every year you have had it', but this is only an approximate guide. Generally, you should not stop other treatment suddenly when starting homeopathy. Many people with eczema come to me wanting to reduce or stop their steroid creams. This is often possible, but stopping other treatment abruptly may cause a big flare-up. I usually advise a gradual reduction in steroid creams once improvement has started, substituting a mild application, often Calendula (Marigold) cream or ointment. Many homeopaths also recommend other treatments, particularly diet and dietary supplements.

More information

This short article is not intended as a guide to self-treatment. For any severe or long-standing skin problem you should consult a trained homeopath, preferably with the agreement of your own doctor. There are some good books on homeopathy, which give more information and guidance on self-treatment:

- **Homeopathy: the family handbook.** Thorsons, £4.99. The best basic guide.
- **The family guide to homeopathy** by Dr Andrew Lock. Hamish Hamilton, £10.99. A comprehensive guide to homeopathy.

- **The family health guide to homeopathy** by Dr Barry Rose. Dragons World, £19.95. Beautifully illustrated.

These books are available through good book shops or from: The British Homeopathic Association, Hahnemann House, 29 Park Street West, Luton LU1 3BE

For an information pack and list of doctors, please send a cheque or postal order for £2 made out to the 'Homeopathic Trust' to: The Homeopathic Trust, 2 Powis Place, London WC1N 3HT. Tel: 0171-837 9469

Getting homeopathic treatment

It is important to be aware that there are two types of homeopath: homeopathic doctors and non-medically qualified practitioners.

Homeopathic doctors have studied medicine in the normal way before specialising in homeopathy. They usually have the letters MFHom or FFHom (Member or Fellow of the Faculty, of Homeopathy) after their name, indicating that they have passed an exam to qualify as a specialist. Like all doctors, they are insured and legally liable if anything should go wrong.

The training and qualifications of non-medical practitioners are not regulated. You need to be careful that the person you consult is competent. Personal recommendation is probably the most reliable. Non-medically qualified practitioners with the letters RSHom (Registered with the Society of Homeopaths) after their names are trained.

Homeopathy is available on the NHS, although it is in short supply. Homeopathic doctors may work privately or in the NHS. In the NHS they may work as GPs or at one of the five NHS Homeopathic Hospitals: the Royal London, Glasgow, Liverpool (Mossley Hill), Bristol and Tunbridge Wells Homeopathic Hospitals. To attend a homeopathic hospital, you need a letter from your own doctor.

Several local NHS homeopathic clinics have been set up recently. Your GP should know if there is one near you. Many private health insurance schemes will pay for treatment from homeopathic doctors.

The following address may be useful in finding a homeopath:

The British Homeopathic Association and Faculty of Homeopathy, Hahnemann House, 29 Park Street West, Luton LU1 3BE. Helpline 0870 444 3950. It can supply a list of qualified homeopathic doctors in your area. Web site: www.truathomeopathy.org.

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