A low protein, vegetarian diet has been shown to be very helpful in the fight against common skin diseases. Although the practice is not embraced by current medical practice, this approach received considerable attention in the past. Today, many nutritionally-inclined health practitioners are experiencing great success by using a dietary approach to control common skin diseases.

Donna Janovich knows what the phrase, "the heartbeat of psoriasis" means. "It's not just a clever phrase invented for use in TV commercials." Donna (a fictitious name) points out. "It's an embarrassing, ugly, itchy skin condition that for years caused me nothing but grief.

"It (the psoriasis) flared up at the worst possible times when I was a teenager: before school tests, before dates, and whenever I got my period.

"In ten years I saw more than a dozen doctors, mostly dermatologists and I swear, each time the treatments got worse: Phi-so-hex showers, coal tar soaps, steroid creams, oral antibiotics, wrapping myself in Saran Wrap at night, X-ray treatments, and finally they recommended that I take Methotrexate, a cancer drug. That was the last straw. I would not take Methotrexate under any circumstances. It causes nausea, internal bleeding and other problems which have got to be worse than having psoriasis."

Today at twenty-five, Donna is cured. She hasn't outgrown her condition and she did not receive any miracle drugs which cleared it up. The end of her skin problems came only after she made some dramatic changes in her diet, among them: a reduction in total protein intake; the elimination of most white flour and white sugar; and an increase in fresh fruits and vegetables. "It has made all the difference in the world," she says. "I feel as if I've come out of some dermatologic hell."

Although she is now symptom-free, clearing up her psoriasis wasn't easy for her. Her skin cleared up after a 28-day supervised fast in which she drank nothing but water (Ed note: we do not recommend this except under the supervision of a health practitioner). As one who had no experience with natural healing previously, Donna found this treatment hard to swallow. But her condition cleared up and Donna was then put on a whole foods, low protein, vegetarian diet.

"It's a diet I fully support now," admits Donna. "But in the beginning I found it hard to adjust to. I was used to eating the way I always had...I had to make some fundamental changes in my eating habits.

"When I did stray off the diet, my psoriasis started to come back in patches, but when I resumed the 'new' diet it went away again."

For Donna, the elimination of "junk foods" and the switch to a lower-protein vegetarian diet have been the key to improving her skin condition. She is just one person among many, who have discovered the link between nutrition and healthy skin. And fortunately for many, some practitioners of the healing arts are still advocating, or rediscovering that many skin diseases can be eliminated or effectively controlled for life, through the use of proper nutrition.

The theory behind diet therapy for skin disorders can be understood when we realize that in addition to protecting our muscles, bones and blood vessels, the skin is also an organ used for the elimination of the body’s waste products. Sweating is a simple example of the skin’s elimination abilities in action.

The ability of our bodies to eliminate toxins is influenced by many factors: the types of toxins our bodies produce (which is influenced by the foods we eat); the amount of exercise we get; the ability of our colon, kidneys and lymphatic systems to process waste; our general health, and so on. The ability to excrete and otherwise deal with waste products of metabolism and digestion varies from person to person.

Toxins which are eliminated through the skin are, by definition, irritants. Their presence in the skin provokes a self-protective reaction designed to neutralize, wall-off, or eliminate toxins. This reaction is the ultimate basis of most skin diseases. According to theory, skin disorders erupt due to the presence of these irritating toxins. Underlying this condition may be sensitive skin, or more likely, a body whose toxic wastes exceed the other eliminative organ’s abilities to break down the toxins and eliminate them through other channels.

In many people, this problem is complicated by a secondary bacterial or viral infection.

The many skin diseases—psoriasis, acne, eczema, urticaria, and others—vary in appearance because of the differing chemical nature of the toxins eliminated through the skin, and because of the secondary bacterial and viral complications.

The popular treatment of skin diseases often consists of application of creams and the intake of drugs. Unfortunately, these treatments serve only to suppress the reaction of the skin to the toxins, or kill the bacteria which have secondarily complicated the situation.
While sometimes giving symptomatic relief, such therapies do not reduce the quantity of toxins being excreted through the skin and do not have a permanent effect. Most people suffering from skin diseases are well aware that if they stop using the creams and drugs, their symptoms will recur. This is because the true cause of their problems has not been discovered and eliminated. Furthermore, the creams may be irritating and the drugs may have dangerous side effects.

The idea that many skin diseases can be linked to the body’s cleansing process and ultimately may have their root in a diet which causes too much toxic waste may be met with skepticism by many doctors. Indeed, some current-day practitioners call the theory ridiculous. But nutritional therapy based on this theory works. In contrast, the authoritative Merck Manual, a handbook of current medical practice, offers no theory and states that the cause for psoriasis is unknown. Yet, the book goes on to offer a variety of treatments which have been successful to one degree or another, including anti-cancer drugs, hormone shots, steroids, and radiation.

Current medical wisdom also holds that diet plays no role in acne. According to "Common Skin Diseases," written by Dr. Howard T. Behrman, M.D. (1978), the modern treatment for acne does not include regulating or restricting the consumption of colas, nuts, potato chips, french fries, donuts, chocolate or ice cream. Rather, the text argues, modern treatment relies on the ingestion of antibiotics and, for severe cases, steroids (a very powerful class of drugs, once used only in life-threatening situations).

Surely, improving one’s diet, especially when this healthy change has eliminated skin problems in others, ought to be considered first before resorting to drugs.

For almost the past fifty years, the medical literature has been silent on the use of nutritional therapy for the treatment of dermatologic diseases. But, prior to 1932 the established medical journals gave serious attention to the subject.

In a 1932 volume of the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA), Dr. Jay F. Schamberg, M.D. then a Professor of Dermatology at the Graduate School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania, described how he had treated psoriasis: "a low protein diet, without any other internal or external treatment, causes a disappearance of the greater part of the eruptions..." This respected physician, along with others, worked extensively with many patients who suffered from psoriasis. Photographs taken before and after a change in his patient’s diets accompany his article. "These photographs," notes Dr. Schamberg, "constitute to my mind irrefutable documentary evidence of the truth of the statement that a low protein diet has an enormous influence on the course of the psoriatic eruption."

Dr. Schamberg believed that excess protein in the diet acted as a direct stimulus to the growth of the tissues forming the eruption. Others have speculated that the excess protein in the diet resulted in excessive production of waste products from protein metabolism: this excess overloads the normal routes of elimination resulting in a shunting of toxic wastes through the skin. Whatever the explanation, the fact remains that a low protein diet dramatically improved the patients’ skin conditions. This was a permanent effect as long as the patient remained on the diet.

We should note here that the average adult American consumes 94 grams of protein daily, mostly from animal foods. This is more than 80% above the RDA of 54 grams set by government nutritionists. Many nutritionists agree that even 54 grams of protein per day is too high. Recent protein studies have shown that a daily consumption of 30 grams a day and even less is not only sufficient to support life and growth, but is often beneficial and healthier than a diet too high in protein. Vegetarians should be warned that excessive consumption of cheese, eggs and dairy products can result in a diet too high in protein.

Also addressing the problem of psoriasis and its relationship to diet was Dr. L. Duncan Bulkley, M.D. In his speech to the Section of Dermatology of the AMA in the early 1900’s, he stated that the proper diet for the treatment of psoriasis is low protein, vegetarian. "All forms of meats, fish, shellfish, eggs, and milk should be excluded. Cereals and vegetables should form the basis of the diet. Sweets and pastries do harm, and alcohol in any form is strictly forbidden.

In addition, the good doctor also cited acid fruits and high-protein legumes as aggravating the condition. "Free indulgence in acid fruits (oranges, grapefruit, pineapples, etc.) increases the eruption, and dried beans, peas and lentils which contain a large percentage of protein are likely to excite the condition when taken to excess."

Dr. Bulkley could not accept the almost incurable nature of some skin diseases. He believed that there had to be a cause for these diseases which, once found and eliminated, would lead to a disappearance of the diseases. Diet, he felt, often played a key role. "Many affections of the skin are influenced by the nutritive processes which are continually going on within the body, and are affected to a greater or lesser degree by the manner in which the metabolism is carried out; of this there can be no doubt."

In 1926, there appeared in the Archives of Dermatology (p. 672-4) a
report entitled "Association of Intestinal Indigestion with Various Dermatoses." The author, Dr. Hans J. Schwartz, M.D. had done extensive work with patients suffering from skin problems, and he published a statistical tome of nine hundred such cases. These people suffered from a wide variety of skin diseases, and Dr. Schwartz found that an important causative factor was excess toxins in the system. In this case the origin of the toxins was bacteria acting upon foods in the intestine. These patients were consuming foods, primarily protein or carbohydrates, in excess of their body's needs.

Dr. Schwartz found that these intestinal toxins were an important causative factor in the production of many skin diseases, among them "severe acne, some types of eczema, urticaria, rosacea, furunculosis, and pruritis. Lower figures were found for psoriasis, mild acne, and other types of eczema."

Writing in the same journal one year later, Dr. J. Frederick Burgess, M.D., a Lecturer in Dermatology at McGill University, and Associate Dermatologist of Montreal General Hospital confirmed the findings of Dr. Schwartz. His conclusion: "While eczema may result from 'external irritant' causes, internal irritants which may be formed in the intestines as a result of bacterial decomposition are also capable of acting as skin irritants."

Dr. James Galloway, M.D., writing in the British Medical Journal (1913, p. 815-817) was another independent observer of the identical phenomenon. Many additional references could be cited, without variation in the basic theme: dietary errors constitute a major causative factor in the production of skin diseases.

Clearly, the physicians of that era were more open to considering the relationship between diet and skin diseases. Why? I don't know. I can only speculate that somewhere along the line the medical profession decided the topical steroids and internal drugs ushered in a new age of cure for skin diseases. In due time, the "old-fashioned" dietary relationship was forgotten or abandoned. It is worth noting that the treatment of diabetes mellitus suffered a similar set-back with the introduction of oral hypoglycemics, a class of drugs which reduced blood sugar in diabetics. The ability of the patients to rely on pills to control their blood sugar levels put dietary controls in second place. It was not until oral hypoglycemics were found to contribute to heart attacks that the importance of diet theory was once again realized. If it is not human nature to pop a pill at the first sign of disease, it is certainly a temptation for modern medicine to dazzle the public with miracle drugs.

Fortunately, not all practitioners have abandoned the nutritional approach to dermatologic disorders. "It's a method I've known to be effective for quite a number of years," notes Dr. David Scott, D.C., a chiropractor in Cleveland, Ohio. "I have found a low protein diet to be extremely effective in treating people with psoriasis and hives, and I know from years of practice that acne can be related to animal protein and fat."

Dr. Scott relates the story of a man who was undergoing a 40-day fast for the treatment of his psoriasis. The man had bad lesions all over his body. By the 36th day, there had been little sign of improvement and Dr. Scott was concerned. "Finally, on the 38th day," he recalls, "the man got out of bed and the lesions dropped off his body like flour off wax paper. When he got out of bed he had a fresh, new layer of skin. His sheets looked like someone had emptied a box of corn flakes over it."

Dr. Robert Gross, D.C. who practices in Hyde Park, N.Y. says that he has successfully treated several people for psoriasis through fasting and nutritional therapy. His most recent case involved a young woman who had had psoriasis for a number of years. The condition failed to respond to other forms of treatment, but after a 10-day fast and the adoption of a low protein, vegetarian diet, the condition disappeared in six weeks and has yet to reappear.

Dr. Ralph Cinque, D.C., a Yorktown, Texas practitioner says that in his practice he has treated psoriasis, severe acne, and lupus successfully through a program of fasting and diet.

Other chiropractors and naturopaths who have treated skin conditions which have responded well to fasting and dietary change tell the same story: that chronic dermatologic disorders can be effectively controlled through diet. Specifically, a low protein, vegetarian diet, without refined foods, high in raw fruits, vegetables, seeds and nuts.

Exactly what constitutes a low protein diet and how far one must go to correct a bodily condition is something to be decided with the consultation of a competent practitioner. For some, correcting a lifelong skin condition may involve a month's worth of fasting and the adoption of a rigid new diet. For others, it may simply mean the elimination of excess sweets, excess protein, and a reduction in fat intake.

The possibility that chronic skin conditions can be corrected through a return to natural foods and eating habits should be encouraging to those who suffer through itching, blemishes and the embarrassment of dry, scaly skin. A review of the old medical literature as well as the recent successes of present-day practitioners should provide those who presently suffer through itching, dry skin and endless cycles of creams, lotions and pills, with cause for celebration and instill visions of complete recovery.

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