

Original Paper

Research Status of Oily Skin and the Use of Appropriate
Technical Methods with Traditional Chinese Medicine
Characteristics

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Abstract

In this paper, the research status of improving oily skin at home and abroad in recent years is reviewed, and the modern treatment schemes for improving oily skin are summarized, in order to provide more schemes for clinical improvement of oily skin, and to provide the treatment methods and ideas for the treatment of acne, folliculitis and seborrheic dermatitis from the theory of preventive treatment of disease, and to provide theoretical basis for the research and clinical application of clinical treatment of oily skin.

Keywords

oily skin, sebaceous gland, Traditional Chinese Medical science, cosmetology

1. Introduction

Oily skin has become a major skin concern for many young and middle-aged adults today. Topics related to oily skin frequently appear in skincare magazines and the short videos of beauty bloggers. In response to this skin type, the cosmetics industry has introduced an endless array of oil-control products, which inadvertently heightens the psychological anxiety of individuals with oily skin. Excessive sebum secretion often leads to bacterial overgrowth on the skin surface and increases susceptibility to microbial invasion, thereby triggering aesthetic skin problems such as acne, folliculitis, and seborrheic dermatitis. Treating these disfiguring skin conditions adds to the financial burden of this population. Moreover, oily skin can lead to negative psychological issues such as anxiety and low self-esteem, gradually affecting individuals' quality of life. Therefore, improving oily skin and reducing facial sebum secretion have become the most pressing concerns for those with oily skin.

2. Oily Skin and Sebaceous Glands

2.1 Oily Skin

Facial skin types are primarily determined by measuring sebum secretion levels and are generally classified as oily, dry, neutral, or combination skin^[1]. Oily skin is one of the most common skin types. Typically beginning at puberty, it is characterized by increased sebum secretion from the sebaceous glands, resulting in an oily sheen, enlarged pores^[2], and sometimes an orange-peel-like appearance. Oily skin tends to adhere to dust and dirt in the air, leading to disfiguring skin conditions such as acne, rosacea, and seborrheic dermatitis^[3]. According to the Baumann Skin Type Indicator (BSTI), a score of 27–33 indicates mild oily skin, while a score of 34–44 indicates moderate-to-severe oily skin. Therefore, a BSTI score above 27 classifies an individual as having oily skin.

2.2 Sebaceous Glands

Sebaceous glands are located in the reticular dermis and are usually associated with hair follicles, forming the pilosebaceous unit. They are primarily distributed on the face, ears, scalp, and upper trunk. Sebaceous glands accumulate lipid droplets through mitosis of their cells; the fully differentiated sebaceous cells disintegrate and release their contents onto the skin surface via holocrine secretion^[4]. Sebum, together with sweat and other substances, forms a lipid film that maintains a healthy epidermal barrier, protecting the skin from bacterial invasion^[5]. Dysfunction of the sebaceous glands can disrupt the skin barrier function. The face is rich in sebaceous glands, and epidermal lipids may be transported to the skin surface at a constant rate as epidermal cells mature. It has been reported that the average sebum secretion rate in healthy adults is approximately 1 mg/10 cm² every 3 hours. A secretion rate exceeding 1.5 mg/10 cm² per 3 hours leads to oily skin or seborrhea^[6].

3. Etiology and Pathogenesis of Oily Skin

3.1 Understanding of Oily Skin in Modern Medicine

The face is rich in sebaceous glands. When hypertrophic sebaceous glands produce excessive sebum, the skin appears shiny and greasy. Therefore, it is concluded that overall hypersecretion of the sebaceous glands is the primary cause of oily skin. Factors influencing sebaceous gland secretion mainly include age, sex, body weight, family history, diet, season, androgens, testosterone, and skin surface humidity^[7]. Although oily skin can protect against dryness and reduce the formation of fine lines and wrinkles, excessive sebum secretion enlarges pores, creates a greasy, reflective appearance, makes makeup difficult to maintain, and significantly increases the severity of acne-prone skin^[8].

3.2 Traditional Chinese Medicine Understanding and Research Progress

There is no specific disease name for oily skin in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). The Orthodox Manual of External Medicine (Waike Zhengzong) states: "Internal diseases may not always manifest externally, but external diseases always have their root internally." Oily skin is closely related to the internal environment of the zang-fu organs. The Miraculous Pivot – Jue Qi(Lingshu – Jue Qi) notes: "When grain enters, qi becomes full... the skin becomes moisturized – this is called fluid." An

appropriate amount of sebum moisturizes and protects the skin. Wang Qi ^[9] proposed the "skin-body correlation theory," suggesting that the more severe the damp-heat and phlegm-dampness constitutions, the higher the skin's oiliness; that is, individuals with damp-heat and phlegm-dampness constitutions have more active sebum secretion than those with other constitutions. Damp-heat constitution is generally characterized by a bitter taste in the mouth, dry throat, a heavy and sluggish body, sticky stools, scanty dark urine, red tongue, and greasy yellow coating. Common facial manifestations include a greasy, shiny complexion that is difficult to clean, enlarged pores, and a tendency to develop acne. These symptoms may worsen in late summer and early autumn or in environments with high humidity and temperature. The main reason is that pathogenic damp-heat spreads to the skin, increasing sebum secretion and resulting in an oily, shiny face ^[10]. Yan Xuhong ^[11] states that sebum secretion and metabolism are closely related to the five zang organs. Normal sebum secretion and metabolism depend on abundant heart qi, sufficient heart blood, the lung's dispersing and descending functions, the spleen's transportation and transformation, the liver's free flow of qi, and the kidney's storing and consolidating functions. Only when yin and yang are balanced and ying and wei are harmonious can sebum be metabolized normally. Zhao Hui ^[12] believes that sebum overflow results from a constitution with spleen and stomach damp-heat, impaired fluid transport, and susceptibility to wind pathogens, leading to disharmony of ying and wei, leakage of body fluids, and dispersion onto the skin surface. Additionally, kidney yin deficiency with exuberant deficient fire forces essence to overflow onto the skin and hair, increasing sebum secretion. Cheng Xiaochun et al. ^[13] point out that seborrhea is associated with "fire," including blazing stomach fire, hyperactivity of heart and liver fire, and upward attack of gallbladder fire. Fire tends to rise and flame upward, fumigating the head, face, chest, and back. "When yang acts on yin, sweat is produced." "Yang" refers to the body's yang qi, "yin" refers to the body's yin essence (fluids), and "sweat" is the product of yang qi acting on yin fluids. The head is the meeting point of all yang meridians; the three yang meridians of the hand and foot all traverse the head and face. Qi and blood are transported through the meridians to nourish the brain, orifices, skin, and hair. Yang qi warms and steams, yin fluids rise, and through the transportation and transformation of qi, blood, and body fluids, sweat and sebum are produced to moisten the skin. However, when yang qi is excessively strong, or when spleen and stomach damp-heat rises, or when liver fire is hyperactive, or when kidney yin deficiency leads to deficient fire consuming true yin and causing it to rise, significant oiliness can result ^[13].

4. Interventions for Oily Skin

4.1 Western Medical Treatments

4.1.1 Pharmacological Therapy

Western medicine offers various methods for treating oily skin, including topical treatments such as retinoids, olmesartan medoxomil, and botulinum toxin type A, as well as systemic treatments such as isotretinoin, spironolactone, and oral contraceptives. These methods have varying degrees of efficacy,

but some may cause serious side effects. For example, topical retinoids can cause skin irritation and local desquamation [14]; botulinum toxin type A can effectively reduce sebum production and excretion, but if injected too superficially, it has little effect, while overly deep injection may inadvertently paralyze local skeletal muscles [15], affecting muscle function and overall aesthetics. Oral isotretinoin can cause teratogenicity, venous thromboembolism, nausea, breast tenderness, and oral contraceptives can cause breakthrough bleeding.

4.1.2 Physical Therapy

Common physical therapies used by dermatologists for oily skin include intense pulsed light (IPL), photodynamic therapy (PDT), high-intensity narrow-spectrum blue light, narrow-band ultraviolet B (NB-UVB), and radiofrequency. IPL inhibits sebum secretion and has certain value in treating oily skin. PDT also suppresses sebaceous gland secretion. Wu Yong [16] conducted PDT on 28 patients with seborrheic dermatitis, and the results showed that scalp sebum secretion in the treatment group was significantly lower than that in the control group ($P < 0.05$), indicating that PDT effectively reduces sebum secretion and provides clinical evidence for treating oily skin. Mu Yanlei et al. [17] used 407–420 nm blue light to irradiate facial lesions of acne patients at high intensity for 15 minutes, twice a week for one month. After treatment, facial lesions improved, and sebum secretion decreased significantly. NB-UVB carries a risk of blistering and erythema [18], and the mechanism of radiofrequency is not yet fully understood, limiting their clinical application.

4.2 Traditional Chinese Medicine Characteristic Therapies

4.2.1 Syndrome Differentiation and Treatment

TCM holds that internal conditions necessarily manifest externally, and internal conditions determine external appearances. Based on clinical manifestations, oily skin can be roughly classified into patterns such as wind-heat in the lung meridian, damp-heat in the spleen and stomach, hyperactivity of liver fire, and kidney yin deficiency. Through syndrome differentiation and treatment, following the three principles of treating according to the individual, the season, and the environment, TCM regulates the internal environment of the zang-fu organs to achieve a balance in external skin quality, thereby nurturing the unique overall beauty of each individual from the inside out. According to pharmacological research, Chinese herbs can regulate sex hormone levels and inhibit sebaceous gland secretion, thus treating oily skin. Jiang Li [19], in a clinical study on treating folliculitis decalvans based on the theory that the lung governs the skin and hair, found that oral Pipao Qingfei Drink combined with topical Chinese herbal lotion (Shengfa Zhiyang Gao) reduced sebum secretion and significantly improved hair greasiness in patients with lung and stomach damp-heat type folliculitis decalvans, leaving the scalp fresh and non-greasy. Zhang Jing [20] observed in clinical practice that Zhang Hongya, a dermatologist renowned in the Jianghuai region, used Modified Yinchenhao Decoction to remove greasiness and control oil, reducing facial sebum secretion in patients with spleen and stomach damp-heat type acne. Lyu Jingjing [21] confirmed in clinical research that Qingre Chushi Decoction (created by famous TCM dermatologist Zhao Bingnan) and Piyan Decoction (an empirical formula of renowned

dermatologist Zhu Renkang) effectively control facial seborrheic dermatitis and improve facial oiliness. Qin Yuehua^[22] used "Wang Qi Damp-Heat Constitution Regulating Formula" to intervene in patients with damp-heat constitution for 8 weeks. Oil levels on the glabella, forehead, and cheeks measured with a skin detector showed a statistically significant decrease. Cao Huazhang^[23] summarized that *Hedyotis diffusa* has anti-androgenic effects and inhibits sebaceous gland secretion, and *Salvia miltiorrhiza* also has anti-androgenic effects, thereby improving skin oiliness.

4.2.2 Topical Application of Chinese Herbs

Topical application of Chinese herbs involves directly applying herbal preparations to a specific body surface area or lesion to deliver the medicinal effects. Zhou Shui-han^[24] used external Baihuang Kushen Lotion to treat damp-heat type scalp seborrheic dermatitis, achieving a total clinical effective rate of 88.23%, with higher safety than the 2% ketoconazole lotion group. Baihuang Kushen Lotion effectively improved scalp seborrhea, itching, and hair loss. In the lotion, *Dictamnus dasycarpus*, *Sophora flavescens*, and *Phellodendron chinense* are the sovereign herbs, all bitter and cold in nature, capable of clearing heat, drying dampness, and having astringent effects. Therefore, Baihuang Kushen Lotion effectively inhibits seborrhea and can improve sebum secretion in oily skin. Herbal ointments are made by grinding herbs into powder or extracting active ingredients through special processes and dissolving them in bases such as petrolatum, lanolin, or honey^[25]. Peng Leilei et al.^[26] treated damp-heat type mild-to-moderate acne vulgaris with Acne Ointment and found that it significantly reduced facial sebum secretion rate and improved the severity of facial lesions, with notable clinical efficacy and high safety. Sun Xiaoyu^[27] applied Qingcuo Powder directly to facial acne lesions, achieving maximum local drug concentration in the shortest time. It cleanses the skin, removes greasiness, effectively inhibits sebum secretion, and reduces facial oiliness. Animal experiments have clearly shown that Qingcuo Powder inhibits sebaceous gland secretion, shrinks pores, and anti-keratinization^[28].

4.2.3 Acupuncture Therapy

The Miraculous Pivot – Pathogenic Qi Hidden in the Zang-fu Organs (Lingshu – Xie Qi Zangfu Bingxing) states: "All meetings of the yang meridians are on the face." Many meridians traverse and connect on the head and face, transporting qi, blood, and body fluids to nourish the facial features. Harmony of the zang-fu organs and meridians results in smooth facial muscles and moisturized skin; disharmony may lead to disfiguring diseases. Dampness is sticky and obstructive, blocking meridians, preventing clear qi from rising and dispersing, and causing turbid qi to accumulate on the surface, resulting in a greasy, shiny skin. Cosmetic acupuncture is based on existing theories of meridians and zang-fu organs. From a holistic perspective, it stimulates local areas and corresponding acupoints appropriately to activate meridian qi and blood flow, coordinate the zang-fu organs, restore skin function, and achieve therapeutic and cosmetic purposes^[29]. Acupuncture can improve skin greasiness caused by excessive sebum secretion. Gao Feng et al.^[30] treated 30 patients with scalp seborrheic dermatitis using plum-blossom needle combined with Western medicine. After treatment, the oiliness score decreased compared to before treatment ($P < 0.05$), and the recurrence rate was low, indicating that plum-blossom

needle combined with Western medicine significantly improves clinical symptoms of oily skin. Fire needling can significantly reduce oil secretion. Porphyrin reflects sebum secretion. Yang Wenfeng et al. [31] observed that fire needling combined with Acne Mixture in the treatment of pre-teen acne significantly improved porphyrin indicators, indicating that the combination therapy reduces skin oiliness.

4.2.4 Acupoint Catgut Embedding

Acupoint catgut embedding involves implanting absorbable protein threads of appropriate length into superficial acupoints, providing sustained and stable stimulation. Prolonged stimulation accumulates therapeutic effects, maximizing treatment outcomes. It can balance yin and yang and harmonize the zang-fu organs by regulating qi and blood, tonifying deficiency and reducing excess. Pan Huanhuan et al. [32] treated spleen and stomach damp-heat type acne vulgaris with acupoint catgut embedding combined with adapalene gel. After treatment, TCM syndrome scores (skin greasiness, halitosis, red tongue with greasy yellow coating) decreased compared to before treatment ($P<0.05$), and the rates of adverse reactions and recurrence were lower than in the adapalene-only group. This demonstrates that acupoint catgut embedding significantly inhibits sebum secretion, reduces greasiness, improves oily skin, and reduces the side effects of topical medications. Chen Liang [33] confirmed that "Modified Zhaqu Pingwei Powder" combined with acupoint catgut embedding effectively treats seborrheic alopecia of the spleen and stomach damp-heat type, significantly improving clinical symptoms, reducing seborrhea, alleviating greasiness, with definite efficacy and minimal adverse reactions.

4.2.5 Autohemotherapy

Autohemotherapy, also known as autologous blood acupoint injection, is a novel treatment method that injects the patient's own venous blood into acupoints or body surfaces to prevent and treat diseases [34, 35]. Blood contains various trace elements, hormones, antibodies, and enzymes that can stimulate immune function, regulate endocrine disorders, reduce hypersensitivity, and inhibit excessive sebaceous gland secretion. Yan Xuezheng et al. [36] treated acne vulgaris with autohemotherapy. The treatment group received autologous blood injections at bilateral Quchi (LI11), Xuehai (SP10), and Zusanli (ST36). After treatment, total scores for skin oiliness and lesions decreased compared to before treatment ($P<0.05$).

4.2.6 Tuina (Massage) Therapy

Tuina is a characteristic TCM therapy. Manipulations applied to the body promote blood circulation and metabolism, accelerating the elimination of waste and preventing excessive oil accumulation [37]. Pathogenic Qi and Zang-fu Organs states: "The qi and body fluids of the twelve meridians all rise to the face." The face is primarily traversed by the yangming meridians, which are abundant in qi and blood. Gentle facial tuina techniques unblock meridians, improve facial qi and blood circulation, and allow essential substances to nourish the face, resulting in a healthy, rosy, and radiant complexion, achieving cosmetic and health benefits. Facial tuina also improves skin elasticity, normalizes sebum and sweat secretion [38], maintains skin radiance, shrinks pores, and reduces facial oiliness.

5. Conclusion

With social and economic development, people are paying increasing attention to skin management. Oily skin can cause low self-esteem and anxiety, affecting interpersonal communication and quality of life. The Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon (Huangdi Neijing) emphasizes "treating disease before it manifests" (preventive treatment), including preventing disease before onset and preventing progression after onset. Regarding the preventive treatment of oily skin: For preventing disease before onset, first, unhealthy lifestyle habits should be changed, such as excessive consumption of spicy, rich, and fatty foods, staying up late, neglecting skin hygiene, over-cleansing, and using chemical skincare products that stimulate hormone secretion. Second, for susceptible constitutions, timely syndrome-based nursing should be provided through exercise, rest, oral Chinese herbs, etc., to adjust the constitution. Third, stress-induced conditions should be addressed with psychological counseling and relaxation. For preventing progression after onset, an integrated approach combining Chinese and Western medicine through multiple pathways should be adopted as early as possible to achieve the best therapeutic outcomes for each patient. Early detection and early treatment, moving the treatment threshold forward, improve patients' quality of life. TCM treatment of oily skin is based on the holistic concept and syndrome differentiation, ensuring safety, stability, durability, and comprehensiveness of efficacy. However, there are currently few studies on acupuncture for improving oily skin, limited basic research on this condition, unclear mechanisms, and a lack of multicenter, large-sample clinical trials, warranting further investigation.

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