

With urbanisation, we have seen the birth of “stress”. Nowadays everything seems to have a certain link to it. We are leading a much more stressful life than our grandparents with more concerns about finance, work and relationship. But what does stress do to our body? There are many diseases aggravated by it and the skin is not spared. One has to consider our developmental anatomy to be able to appreciate the link between the skin and the brain. Both develop from the same ectodermal tissue, with part of it developing into the nervous system and the rest becoming the skin. Thus there is a close link between the two and diseases affecting the nervous system can have a detrimental effect on the skin. There are several diseases of the skin that are aggravated by stress and some common ones will be discussed below.

Chronic eczema is a very common disease, which results from the dysfunction of the skin barrier. It presents as dryness, itch and redness. There are various types of eczema and the common ones can be controlled with the use of corticosteroid creams and emollients. However, flares occur whenever there is a change in weather pattern or during stressful situations.

Psoriasis is an inflammatory skin disease whereby the skin regenerates faster than it can shed itself. This results in thick scales, redness and in severe cases the joints can also be affected. Psoriasis is a difficult disease to treat and the patient needs lifelong monitoring. Severe cases have a close link with heart disease, diabetes and hypertension. This disease has a very close link to depression and has flare up during stressful periods.

Herpes simplex is a viral infection that commonly causes fever blisters or disease of the genitalia. After an episode, the disease remains dormant in the nerves supplying the infected areas. Thus it evades the immune system and becomes active from time to time. Any stressor, like a fever, severe sun exposure, stress at work or an exam, can result in active disease.

Acne vulgaris chronic disease that is more commonly seen during teenage years. However, it can occur at any age and is referred to a ‘pimples’ in layman’s term. Acne commonly affects the face, chest, upper arms and back and can present in various forms. Comedones, microcomedones, pustules and cysts are just a few of the lesions seen in Acne. This disease warrants early aggressive treatment, due to its propensity to form scars on the face. Thus one has to start with medications at an early stage and have regular medical care. However, during stressful times, even in controlled cases, new breakouts are common and tend to take a long time to heal.

Chronic urticaria is a poorly understood disease, where one develops wheals and red blotches all over the body. These lesions tend to itch or tingle and disappear within a few hours. Due to unknown reasons, mast cells in the skin, produces abnormal amounts of histamine. This in turn causes vasodilatation of the venous systems leading to the blotches. There may be many trigger factors, including stress, exercise, sun exposure and water. Once established, this disease can affect the quality of life, thus early medical intervention is important.

Rosacea is a common disease affecting mainly people of fair skin. It starts in the third decade of life and commonly presents as redness of the cheeks and mid face. With time, there is appearance of dilated capillaries on the affected areas, acne-like lesions and also dilated pores. The nose can enlarge in men leading to a condition called as rhinophyma. Rosacea sufferers are commonly mistaken to be heavy alcoholic, due to the way they look. There are several trigger factors and stress is one of the commonly implicated.

Alopecia (hair loss) is becoming more prevalent at younger ages. There are many causes for alopecia and stress is a front- runner. Alopecia areata and telogen effluvium have a direct link to stress, whereas other conditions like trichotillomania are indirectly related. One can always find out the underlying causes of hair loss as well as the mental state. Treatment may involve psychotherapy.

The above discussion is just a taste of the many conditions linked to stress. One needs to understand the psychological aspect when treating a skin condition. An ideal approach would be to have a psychologist a hand for cases that are not improving with conventional medicine.

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