

Soothe Your Skin

The Ayurvedic Approach to Inflamed or Irritated Skin

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Is your skin prone to inflammation and irritation? Perhaps you have always had extremely sensitive skin – the type that sunburns in a matter of minutes, or that breaks out in hives after a seemingly minor contact with something “foreign.” Maybe you suffer from burning or itching sensations, acne, eczema, dermatitis, psoriasis, or any number of other inflammatory skin conditions. Well, while you won’t find any *secret* remedies here, you will find Ayurveda’s rich and insightful perspective on skin imbalances and their origins. You’ll also find a number of practical Ayurvedic tools designed to pacify your skin conditions while invoking its inner radiance.

Learning to Think From the Inside Out

Ayurveda offers the perspective that while all skin conditions can seem superficial in nature, the skin is actually a reflection of hidden realities within each of our bodies. Skin conditions are rarely caused by an issue on the surface of the skin; they are far more likely to be the result of a deeper imbalance – making it somewhat ineffective to treat the symptom alone. Instead, we must also delve deeper, beneath the surface of the skin. This is why Ayurvedic skin care aims to identify and treat the underlying cause of skin imbalances – an approach that can take a little time, but that tends to offer real and sustained results. The best part is, the improvements you’ll notice on the surface of your skin are usually the result of a more significant transformation – one that will improve your life in ways that you never imagined *skin care* could.

The Deeper Ecology of the Skin

Pitta's Influence on the Skin

According to Ayurveda, pitta is responsible for the color, texture, and temperature of our skin, as well as its luster and glow; it governs the function of sweating, processes everything that we apply externally to the skin (lotions, soaps, medications, oils, etc.), and digests anything that contacts the skin more passively (like dust, chemicals, irritants, and allergens) (1). It's also important to highlight the fact that inflammation – no matter where it is in the body – is almost always a sign of aggravated pitta. The skin is one of the primary places where pitta resides in the body – which not only makes it especially vulnerable to pitta imbalance, but an active outlet for it. So, balancing pitta systemically can go a long way toward supporting healthy skin. It will allow critical physiological functions in the skin to continue unimpeded while helping to prevent skin irritations from cropping up in the first place.

Pitta Elsewhere in the Body

Pitta also has a strong presence in the blood, the liver, and the digestive tract – all of which have a direct impact on the skin. Excess pitta in any one of these areas can have an amplified effect on the skin (1). Perhaps you have a voracious appetite, excess thirst, low blood sugar, hyperacidity, loose stools, or sensitivity to spicy or fried foods. Do you tend to have burning, red, or bloodshot eyes? Are the whites of your eyes a bit yellow? Do you experience pain and tenderness in your breasts, nipples, or testicles? Have you suffered from heavy or painful menstrual cycles, herpes outbreaks, or shingles? These are all signs that pitta is provoked internally, which inevitably affects the skin. Why? Because whenever excess heat, excess oiliness, improperly digested foods, cellular waste, excess vata, pitta, or kapha, and any other toxins accumulate in the body, the skin serves as an organ of elimination – a vehicle for flushing these disruptive forces out of the body. As this occurs, any number of skin conditions can arise: acne, rashes, hives, eczema, burning or itching sensations, dermatitis, psoriasis, canker sores, skin ulcers, hematomas, hemorrhoids, and sometimes, even more severe issues like bleeding disorders, jaundice, or skin cancer.

Pitta Season: An Exacerbating Factor

Ayurveda teaches us that like increases like. Summer is a decidedly pitta season, meaning that the qualities in nature during the summertime mirror the qualities of pitta. There is more light, heat, intensity, and sharpness in the environment during the summer months, which increases the likelihood of pitta provocation at this time of year. It is worth mentioning that, during the heat of summer, the *agni* (digestive fire) actually diffuses away from the digestive tract and disperses into the blood – keeping the core of the body a bit cooler. This means that there is more heat, intensity, and sharpness in the bloodstream during the summer season as well. These compounding factors make the blood and the skin an outright hot zone for pitta imbalances during the summertime.

Perhaps you've noticed that, on some level, you dread the arrival of summer because you are so much more likely to experience flare-ups in your skin. Or perhaps you're quite clear that your

particular skin issues are most prevalent at a different time of year, or even year around. These are important pieces of information that may prove very helpful as you begin to identify the underlying cause of your specific imbalances.

The Influence of the Emotional Experience

We also have to remember that the skin is deeply influenced by patterns in the emotional and energetic body – stress, anger, or fear, etc. (1). This is not surprising; just picture the blush of embarrassment, the pallor of fear, or the flush of rage. These more subtle influences should certainly be considered when trying to heal the skin. Hot emotions such as anger, rage, envy, and judgment are the most likely to exacerbate inflammatory skin conditions, but the general stress level should be taken into account as well.

The Usual Suspects: Common Causes of Skin Imbalance

Obviously, the skin has a very complex relationship with the deeper ecology of the body and mind. And already, we can see that there are many places to look when trying to uncover the root cause of an inflammatory skin condition. Among the most important players are:

- the digestive system
- the blood
- the liver
- any imbalances in vata, pitta, and kapha
- emotional disturbances
- the season

The critical take away message is this: most skin issues originate deep within the body – with digestive imbalances, weaknesses in related organs, or excess heat and toxicity circulating in the blood – all of which are easily exacerbated by seasonal and emotional influences. So what can we do to support healing?

The Path Toward Healing: Context Matters Most

Ayurveda is unique in that it offers a number of effective treatment strategies for every ailment; this is certainly the case with skin conditions. But in Ayurveda, the larger context of our lives – who we are, and how we got to this moment in time – is actually far more important than any one symptom. This is especially true when it comes to the skin. So, as you consider which of the following therapies might best serve you, it's your particulars that matter most: your constitution, your digestive capacity, your strengths, your weaknesses, and the sum total of your imbalances.

If you suffer from a skin condition of any kind, a qualified Ayurvedic practitioner can help you identify the origins of your symptoms and offer a corresponding treatment protocol to help you focus your healing efforts for the best results. But it may also be valuable for *you* to consider the context of your life, connect with your deepest inner knowing, and ask yourself:

- What are the most important factors at play in my particular situation?

- Can I identify the underlying source of my condition – the root cause?

Exploring these questions with mindful awareness can help to illuminate which therapies are the most likely to address your needs at the deepest level.

Generalized Support for Pitta

Given the close relationship between pitta, the skin, other internal pitta sites, and inflammation, general pitta-pacifying measures can often provide fairly meaningful support where inflammatory skin conditions are concerned.

Diet

Simple dietary choices, like tending to proper [food combining](#) and supporting healthy digestion can go a long way toward supporting pitta, preventing toxicity throughout the body, and helping to balance skin issues. Start by eating an appropriate diet of healthy, whole foods. Specific herbal recommendations to help strengthen digestion are below in the herb section. When pitta is high, you can ramp up your efforts by eating a pitta pacifying diet, drinking some [cumin](#), [coriander](#), and [fennel](#) tea (CCF tea), eating light, cooling foods, or enjoying a cleansing [pitta pacifying kitchari](#) on occasion (2). Keep in mind that specific foods and drinks – like very spicy foods (e.g. cayenne pepper and chilies), very sour or acidic foods (like vinegar or pickles), alcohol, and chocolate – can exacerbate inflammation in the skin. It can take anywhere from a few hours to a few days – even up to a week – before you see the effects, but they're often there.

Daily Rhythms

Pitta thrives with a sense of routine, so sticking to a more predictable schedule can help to keep your mind and body both cool and grounded. Pitta benefits from having consistent meal times, rising with – or even before – the sun, and retiring relatively early (ideally by 10pm). If you're entirely new to creating an Ayurvedic routine, you'll find more extensive guidance in our daily routine resource.

Appropriate Exercise

Pitta is very active in the atmosphere at mid-day, from about 10am-2pm, which also tends to be the hottest time of day. Exercise increases heat, and can easily provoke pitta. Mid-day is therefore not an optimal time of day to exercise. Exercise in the early morning or evening, from about 6-10 am/pm is far more appropriate for pitta, and offers improved strength and stamina as well. When balancing pitta, it is also important not to be overly vigorous about exercise (2). Pitta tends to have a great deal of ambition and drive, but is often more delicate than we like to think. Activities such as walking, hiking, swimming, cycling, and yoga – all done with relaxed effort – tend to balance pitta better than more intense forms of exercise.

Yoga, Pranayama, & Meditation

A regular practice to quiet the mind can be instrumental in keeping pitta cool and calm throughout the year (2). Even finding just 5-15 minutes each day for some sort of practice can be transformative. [Empty Bowl Meditation](#) is a simple, but beautiful practice suitable to most anyone. [Nadi Shodhana](#) pranayama is incredibly calming and grounding, and it balances all of the doshas. If you need more of the cool quality in particular, [Sheetali Pranayama](#) is very cooling and can help to quell excess heat (2). If a little movement is more appealing, [Pitta Pacifying Yoga](#) focuses on a moderate pace, an attitude of surrender, and emphasizes grounding, twisting, forward folds, and freedom of movement in the postures. [Moon Salutations](#) offer a simple, introductory pitta pacifying flow (2).



Shield the Body from the Sun

Pitta is generally fairly intolerant of prolonged sun exposure. Ideally, when balancing pitta, we would avoid being in the sun during the heat of the day and limit our outdoor activities to the morning and evening (2). Whenever it is necessary to be out of doors, (especially in the heat of the summer) it is important to shield the body from undue sun exposure; wear clothing that covers as much skin as possible. In the summertime, you can protect against overheating by wearing clothes that are loose and lightweight (2). The head and eyes are particularly sensitive to excess sunlight, so wearing a hat and sunglasses is essential whenever pitta is high.

Enjoy Cooling Baths, Essential Oils, and Colors

Changing a few simple things in your daily habits can also help to cool and calm pitta. Consider reducing the water temperature in your shower or bath – even just a slight adjustment can make a difference (3). Apply some cooling essential oils (like khus or jasmine) to the crown of the head and the 6 other chakra points to cool the energetic body (2). And finally, dress in, and expose yourself to, an abundance of cooling colors: greens, blues, purples and whites.

Donate Blood

Donating blood is a very effective means of pacifying pitta because it requires the body to replace a relatively large quantity of blood at once. This helps to remove excess heat, stagnation, and toxins from the body while purifying and rejuvenating the blood. Particularly if your skin issues tend to be most bothersome in the summer, consider donating blood before the onset of the summer season (3).

If you'd like more information on general pitta pacifying measures, please see our resource on [balancing pitta](#). If you're intrigued by the possibility of supporting pitta through the summer season in particular, you'll find more comprehensive guidance in our [summer season guide](#).

External Therapies to Support the Skin

Even though skin issues typically originate beneath the surface of the skin, there are a number of external applications that encourage the overall health of the skin, and that help to soothe and support the natural healing process of the skin when it is irritated.

Abhyanga (Ayurvedic Self Massage)

This ancient practice of self-massage with oil is deeply detoxifying and very supportive of the skin overall. It benefits both the skin and the deeper tissues of the body. *Abhyanga* calms and lubricates the skin, penetrates and cleanses the sweat glands, settles the nervous system, helps to hydrate and rejuvenate all of the tissues, and promotes healthy circulation (2). On a more subtle level, *abhyanga* strengthens the emotional, energetic, and spiritual aspects of consciousness; it creates an insulating and protective barrier around the Self, shielding us from any disruptive energies that we encounter throughout the day. *Abhyanga* can very effectively reduce stress and other emotional disturbances, minimizing their negative impacts on the skin.

In the morning, before a shower or bath, massage about ¼ cup of oil into the skin. If pitta is high, the best oils for *abhyanga* are [Pitta Massage Oil](#), [Organic Coconut Oil](#), or [Organic Sunflower Oil](#). These oils are particularly good at pacifying sensitive or reactive skin, and can help to soothe the skin after a sunburn (2). For further instructions, an understanding of which oils would be best for your skin at this time, and a helpful video, please see our more complete resource on [Ayurvedic Self Massage](#). If pitta is high, pay careful attention to the section outlining [Pitta Pacifying Abhyanga](#).

Chickpea or Almond Flours & Pastes

The practice of massaging the body with a dry powder (like chickpea or almond flour), stimulates movement of the lymph, balances both kapha and pitta, further encourages detoxification and circulation, liquefies fat, and helps to remove excess oil from the skin following *abhyanga* (4). A powder can be used in conjunction with (or instead of) a more traditional oil massage, depending on your constitution, your current state of balance, and the season.

Pastes (made by mixing these dry powders with water) can be applied to more specific areas of skin to support health and healing (3). Chickpea flour is drying, scraping, astringent, and

cleansing. As a paste, it makes a wonderful facial cleanser and can be used on other parts of the body as well. Mix about 1 teaspoon chickpea flour with just enough water to make a paste, rub it in, and rinse with water. Consider following this cleansing routine with an almond flour paste – which is more nourishing, hydrating, and rejuvenating. Again, add just enough water to the almond flour to make a paste, apply it to the affected skin, let it dry for up to 30 minutes, and rinse with water (3).

These practices can be done every day or just on occasion to support clean, clear, and vibrant skin.



Soothing Skin Balm

If your skin is craving a comforting balm, try [Soothing Skin Balm](#). This poignant combination of Ayurvedic herbs and oils cools, soothes, and hydrates the skin. It can be applied as needed to stimulate circulation, support detoxification, and to promote natural healing.

Herbal Oils to Enhance Skin Health

Certain herbal oils are fabulous for the skin and can be applied to specific regions of the skin to support health and healing – either during *abhyanga*, or at any other time.

- *Neem Oil*
[Neem Oil](#) is especially good for cooling and soothing aggravated skin and excess heat. If you spend a lot of time in the sun, you might even consider adding some Neem Oil to your regular *abhyanga* oil; it reduces pitta in the skin and can be used regularly on the face (3).
- *Brahmi Oil*
[Brahmi Oil](#) is wonderful for massaging the scalp and the soles of the feet, and can be used elsewhere to offer soothing support to the skin. While it is best known for its calming effect on the mind, Brahmi has a strong affinity for the skin – where it has a similar effect. As a tonic for pitta, it tends to support health and healing in the skin and it also makes a fantastic face moisturizer (3).

Neem & Aloe Soap

While Ayurveda recommends only a sparing use of soap, [Neem & Aloe Soap](#) is cooling, pitta pacifying, and deeply soothing to the skin.

Cooling Substances for the Skin

When the skin is acutely aggravated, an external application of an appropriate cooling substance can have an immediately soothing effect.

- *Aloe Vera Gel*
Aloe vera gel has long been revered for its capacity to rejuvenate the skin while supporting its natural healing process. It is very cooling, and it has a particular affinity for pitta in the skin. Just apply the gel directly to the affected skin.
- *Cilantro Pulp*
Place a handful of washed cilantro into a blender with about 1/3 cup water and blend. Strain the liquid from the pulp and place the pulp directly on the skin (3). You may drink the juice (see below).
- *Melon Rind*
After enjoying a melon, the inner rind (the part of the fruit just inside the rind) can be rubbed directly on the skin to cool and soothe it topically (3).
- *Fresh Coconut Water*
Break open a fresh coconut and apply the coconut water to the skin (3).

Foods and Drinks That Soothe the Skin From the Inside

Aloe Vera Juice or Gel

Ingesting aloe vera juice or gel can be tremendously helpful in bolstering the very systems and tissues that most affect skin health. It is a powerful ally for inflamed skin because of its affinity for the digestive tract, the liver, the blood, the skin, and all of the body's tissues (5). Simply drink 2-6 tablespoons, two or three times daily (3). Aloe vera is also a potent carrier for herbs. For best results, consult an Ayurvedic practitioner for more personalized advice.

Cilantro Juice

Cilantro has a very fast-acting and soothing effect on the system and can help to cool and soothe irritated skin. Place a handful of washed and chopped cilantro into a blender with about 1/3 cup water and blend. Strain, and drink the liquid (3). The remaining pulp can be applied topically to the skin for a more localized effect (3).



“Blue” Water

Certain wavelengths of light, and therefore specific colors, can have a profoundly soothing effect on our systems. One way to settle pitta systemically is to ingest water that has been infused with cooling blue light. Begin by filling a clear glass jar or bottle with water. Cover the jar with some blue cellophane (usually available at art supply stores). Place the container in the sun for a couple of hours so that the water receives the infusion of blue light. Drink 1-3 cups of this water per day (3). This practice can have a remarkable effect on aggravated skin.

Melons

Melon is generally very cooling and pitta pacifying. Eating melon during the summer season (or at any time of year when [pitta imbalances](#) are active) can help to pacify pitta, resolve the underlying provocation, and soothe the skin. Melon should always be eaten alone, not in combination with other foods (3).

Pitta Pacifying Milk

This recipe is wonderfully restorative; it corrects, from the inside, the very types of imbalances that can cause inflammation in the skin (3). Mix 2 tablespoons coriander, 1 tablespoon cumin, and 1 tablespoon raw natural sugar. Boil a cup of high quality whole milk (ideally, non-homogenized), remove from heat, and add ½ teaspoon of the above mixture. Steep for 10 minutes and drink once or twice daily until the skin recovers (3).

Herbs to Support the Skin

The following herbs and formulas are commonly used to strengthen the very systems that usually underlie irritated skin. Choose according to where you need the most support: Turmeric, Neem, Brahmi (Gotu Kola), some liver & blood cleansing formulas

- [Turmeric](#)
Turmeric is said to enhance the complexion and foster beautiful skin (5, 3). When the skin

is inflamed, turmeric is a powerful ally because of its clarifying and detoxifying effect and its strong affinity for the digestive system, the liver, the blood, and the skin.

- [Neem Tablets](#)
Neem is one of Ayurveda's most celebrated herbs for the skin. Its bitter flavor makes it very cooling, and it pacifies both pitta and kapha. Neem purifies the blood, supports proper digestion, promotes healing, removes excess heat, and destroys toxins (5). It has a strong affinity for the lymph, the blood, and the skin. Because it is so cold and bitter, too much neem can aggravate vata; it is often combined with other herbs to offset this potential
- [Brahmi \(Gotu kola\)](#)
We have already seen that Brahmi Oil can be applied externally to the skin, but Brahmi's tridoshic nature and its affinity for the skin make it a worthwhile internal ally as well. This herb bolsters the skin's natural capacity to heal, pacifies pitta in the skin, and strengthens the skin's natural protective qualities – all while cleansing and softening the skin (5).
- Digestive Herbs
Because proper digestion is so critically important to skin health, offering some internal support to the digestive process can do wonders for the skin.
- [Triphala](#) or [Amalaki](#)
Triphala is a highly revered Ayurvedic digestive tonic that is generally pacifying to all three doshas. However, during the summer season, especially in cases of high pitta or excess heat, it often makes sense to switch to Amalaki – one of the three ingredients in triphala. To cleanse the digestive tract, these herbs are typically taken before bed. 1-2 [Triphala Tablets](#) or [Amalaki Tablets](#) can be taken with warm water. Or, if you prefer, either powdered form can be prepared as a tea (add ½ teaspoon Triphala Powder or Amalaki Powder to a cup of boiled water, steep for about 10 minutes, cool and drink).

Your Personalized Path to Healthy Skin

We understand that the list of therapies that have been presented may feel overwhelming on some level. But remember, you are searching for a personal gateway toward healing – a kind of physical and energetic sweet spot that will address the very origin of your conditions. Tuning in to your unique needs will support deeper healing. Perhaps it's clear that you would benefit from some changes in your diet. Or maybe it's a new meditation practice, just the right herb, or a combination of several tools that appeal to you. Whatever the case, pick one practice, or a few to experiment with and notice the results you're getting. It may not happen overnight. In fact, it often takes some time and effort to align with our authentic path toward balance, and developing self-awareness is an important part of the process. But, as you begin this journey, know that the Ayurvedic tradition has stood the test of time for over 5,000 years, and continues to help and inspire people around the world today. So here's to you, to your evolving health, and to clear and radiant skin.

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