

Use of Alternative Medicine by Patients with Psoriasis

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Background : Psoriasis is a disabling and intractable disease influencing the psychosocial life of the patients. Patients who are frustrated with orthodox medicine may explore alternative therapies.

Objective : This study was done to research on the actual condition of the use of alternative medicine in the patients with psoriasis.

Methods : A self-administered questionnaire was constructed, and was given to the patients to answer our questions.

Results : Among 128 patients with psoriasis, 61 (47.7%) reported previous use of one or more forms of alternative medicine. The absence of satisfactory long-term effects of physician-provided therapy was the main reason for patients trying alternative medicine. Persons without skin disease and the mass media were the main sources of information on alternative medicine.

Conclusion : Alternative therapies were widely utilized by subjects participating in this study, and dermatologists need to be aware of alternative treatments employed by their patients.

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Key Words : Alternative medicine, Psoriasis

Alternative medicine represents practices neither incorporated into the mainstream of Western medicine nor validated by traditional scientific instruments, such as double-blind, controlled trials.¹ Alternative medicine is attracting increasing attention in the mass media and among patients in many countries. It may complicate patient-doctor communication and reduce patient compliance regarding treatment recommended by doctors, leading

to possible serious clinical complications.² Thus, has become relevant for practicing dermatologists to be reasonably knowledgeable about this field.

Psoriasis is a disabling and intractable disease influencing the psychosocial life of the patients. Patients who are frustrated with orthodox medicine may explore alternative therapies. Before introduction of western medicine, oriental medicine including herbal remedies and acupuncture had prevailed in Korea, and many people may have the misconception that herbal remedies have no adverse effects due to their natural composition. Therefore, many people may have unexplainable trust in oriental medicine.

Some studies on the use of alternative medicine among patients with psoriasis have been carried out in other countries,³⁻⁶ but no study has been done in Korea.

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We have carried out a questionnaire study to investigate the frequency of the use of alternative medicine, forms of alternative medicine tried, patients' motives for seeking alternative medicine, sources of information on alternative medicine, and the patients' opinion on the effects of such treatments among patients with psoriasis in Korea. In addition, we studied whether its use is related to age, sex, disease duration, or family income.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A self-administered questionnaire was constructed on the basis of similar studies^{3,5} and pretested among persons with and without skin disease. The questionnaire was given to all 97 psoriasis patients (excluding palmoplantar pustulosis) seen at the dermatological out-patient department of Hallym University Hospital between June 1999 and December 1999. In addition, it was sent to the patients (n = 134) registered between January 1998 and May 1999 as having psoriasis (excluding palmoplantar pustulosis) at the dermatological out-patient department of Hallym University Hospital. Of 36 returned questionnaires, 31 were accepted for analysis. 128 (70 males, 58 females) in all were accepted for analysis.

The questionnaire included 9 questions with closed or open answers. Parents were asked to fill in the questionnaire for children. Disease duration was based on the year when the patients had experienced the first symptoms of the skin disease,

without consideration of spells of remission.

The patients were asked if they had tried alternative medicine with two options: 'have not tried', 'have tried'. It was emphasized that treatment for conditions other than their skin disease should not be included. Patients who reported use of alternative medicine were asked to state their main reason for trying alternative therapy (with five closed alternatives and one open), to state their main source of information on alternative therapy (with five closed alternatives and one open), and to evaluate its effect on a five-point scale. Separate answers were to be given for each form of alternative medicine.

For statistical analysis, χ^2 -test and Fisher's exact test were used. A probability level of < 0.05 was considered significant. All p-values are two-sided.

RESULTS

Among 128 patients with psoriasis, 61 patients (47.7%) had tried alternative treatments (48.6% of the men and 46.6% of the women) and 35 patients (27.3%) had tried more than two forms of treatment.

The frequencies of the eight forms of alternative medicine tried are shown in Table 1. The three forms of treatment most commonly employed were herbal remedies (33.6%), health food preparations (17.2%), sunbathing (12.5%).

The proportion of patients who had tried alternative medicine varied in accordance with several factors.

1. Age and sex

The mean age of the 128 respondents was $40.4 \pm$

Table 1. Numbers and proportions of patients reporting use of various forms of alternative medicine

	No.	%
Herbal remedies	43	33.6
Health food preparations	22	17.2
Sunbathing	16	12.5
Thermalism*	13	10.2
Aloe vera	11	8.6
Acupuncture	11	8.6
Vitamin therapies	7	5.5
Diet change	6	4.7
Other forms**	6	4.7

*Thermalism indicates hot spring

**Includes nonprescription tanning device, infrared therapy

Table 2. Numbers and proportions of patients in different age groups reporting use of alternative medicine

Age(yr)	a / b*	%
≤ 15	4/8	50.0
16-30	13/31	41.9
31-45	25/42	59.5
46-60	13/28	46.4
≥ 61	6/19	31.6

*a: numbers of patients who had tried alternative medicine

b: total numbers of patients in age group

17.8 years, with a range of 3 to 86 years. The largest proportion of patients who had tried alternative medicine was found in the age group 31-45 years (Table 2). There were no significant differences between males and females.

2. Disease duration

The mean disease duration was 10.5 ± 8.2 years, with a range of 1 to 40 years. Patients with disease duration more than 10 years (61.8%) had tried alternative medicine more often than patients with disease duration less than 5 years (32.6%) ($p < 0.05$).

3. Family income

There was no significant correlation between the use of alternative treatments and family income ($p > 0.05$). Distinct difference among the individual treatment modalities in correlation with family income was not noted, and statistical analysis could not be done because of the small sample size.

4. Evaluation of physician/hospital treatment

Patients reporting "very unsatisfactory" or "unsatisfactory" as a result of physician/hospital treatment (53.9%) had tried alternative medicine more often than those reporting "very satisfactory" or "satisfactory" results of physician/hospital treatment (32.0%) ($p < 0.05$) (Table 3).

5. Reasons for trying alternative medicine

The main reason of the patients for trying alternative medicine was "poor results from physician/hospital treatment", but "I wish to try everything" was also reported by many (Table 4). For herbal remedies, a rather larger proportion of patients answered "own confidence in therapy" than they did for the other forms of alternative medicine.

6. Sources of information on alternative medicine

"Persons without the same skin disease" was most frequently stated as being the main source of information, although "persons with the same skin disease" was most frequently stated in the case of sunbathing (Table 5).

Table 3. Numbers and proportions of patients who have tried alternative medicine grouped in accordance with their evaluation of physician-provided treatments

	a / b*	%
Very satisfactory	1/2	50.0
Satisfactory	7/23	30.4
Not so bad	12/27	44.4
Unsatisfactory	26/50	52.0
Very unsatisfactory	15/26	57.7

* a: numbers of patients who had tried alternative medicine

b: total numbers of patients who had given the same answer

Table 4. Reasons for trying alternative medicine (percentages are given in parentheses) Question: What was the main reason for trying this treatment?

	Herbal remedies	Health food preparations	Sun-bathing	Thermalism	Aloe vera	Acupuncture
Poor results of physician/hospital therapy	20(46.5)	7(31.8)	7(43.8)	6(46.1)	2(18.2)	7(63.6)
I wish to try everything	14(32.5)	11(50.0)	7(43.8)	5(38.5)	6(54.5)	3(27.3)
Side effects of physician/hospital therapy	0(0.0)	2(9.1)	1(6.2)	1(7.7)	2(18.2)	0(0.0)
Own confidence in therapy	6(14.0)	0(0.0)	0(0.0)	0(0.0)	0(0.0)	1(9.1)
Doctors are not concerned enough about my case	1(2.3)	2(9.1)	0(0.0)	1(7.7)	0(0.0)	0(0.0)
Other	2(4.7)	0(0.0)	1(6.2)	0(0.0)	1(9.1)	0(0.0)
Total	43(100.0)	22(100.0)	16(100.0)	13(100.0)	11(100.0)	11(100.0)

Table 5. Sources of information on alternative medicine (Percentages are given in parentheses)

Question: In what way was this treatment brought to your attention? What was, in your opinion, the main way?

	Herbal remedies	Health food preparations	Sun-bathing	Thermalism	Aloe vera	Acupuncture
Recommended by persons without the same skin disease	16(37.2)	9(40.9)	3(18.8)	6(46.2)	4(36.4)	5(45.4)
Recommended by persons with the same skin disease	10(23.2)	1 (4.5)	7(43.7)	1(7.7)	1(9.1)	2(18.2)
Articles or news of TV/radio/magazines/papers	5(11.6)	0 (0.0)	2(12.5)	0 (0.0)	1(9.1)	1(9.1)
Advertisement of the press	6(14.0)	8(36.4)	0(0.0)	1(7.7)	0 (0.0)	2(18.2)
Recommended by salesmen or saleswomen/agencies	0(0.0)	4(18.2)	0(0.0)	1(7.7)	5(45.4)	0(0.0)
Other	6(14.0)	0 (0.0)	4(25.0)	4(30.7)	0(0.0)	1(9.1)
Total	43(100.0)	22(100.0)	16(100.0)	13(100.0)	11(100.0)	11(100.0)

Table 6. Evaluation of the results of alternative therapies by patients (Percentages are given in parentheses)

Question: If the alternative treatment was completed, what, in your own opinion, has its effect been on your skin disease in general?

	Herbal remedies	Health food preparations	Sun-bathing	Thermalism	Aloe vera	Acupuncture
Very good	2(4.6)	0(0.0)	0(0.0)	0(0.0)	0(0.0)	1(9.1)
Good	1(2.3)	1(4.5)	2(12.4)	0(0.0)	0(0.0)	1(9.1)
Some improvement	10(23.3)	3(13.6)	11(68.8)	5(38.5)	4(36.4)	0(0.0)
No change	26(60.5)	17(77.3)	3(18.8)	7(53.8)	7(63.6)	7(63.6)
Aggravation	4(9.3)	1(4.6)	0(0.0)	1(7.7)	0(0.0)	2(18.2)
Total	43(100.0)	22(100.0)	16(100.0)	13(100.0)	11(100.0)	11(100.0)

7. Evaluation of the results of alternative therapies by patients and adverse events

The general opinion of the patients on the effect of alternative medicine is shown in Table 6. Of those who had tried herbal remedies, the majority of patients (69.8%) reported "no improvement" or "aggravation" of their skin disease. The patients' evaluations were quite similar for the other forms of alternative medicine except for "sunbathing", where a majority of the patients (81.2%) reported improvement. Only patients who had tried herbal remedies reported adverse events. Five (11.6%) of the 43 respondents who had tried herbal remedies had ever experienced adverse events. Adverse events reported were skin rash (2 patients), weight gain (2 patients), pruritus (1 patient).

DISCUSSION

Alternative therapies are becoming increasingly important in many countries. Recently, the sight of alternative medicine has been changed in Korea. As a reflective index, the National Institute of Alternative Medicine was established to carry out study for scientific usefulness of alternative medicine. Dermatologists caring for patients with chronic skin diseases must recognize that their patients are utilizing alternative therapeutic modalities.

We found that 47.7% of the patients with psoriasis in this study had tried alternative treatments to treat their psoriasis. As expected, herbal remedies were the most frequently used form of alternative treatment among patients. Jensen³ found that

42.5% of psoriatic patients in Norway had tried one or more forms of alternative treatment, and the three forms of treatment most commonly employed were health food preparations (24.5%), herbal remedies (18.8%), homeopathy (17.9%). Homeopathic treatments were not mentioned by our patients. Another recent survey of American psoriatic patients found that 62.0% had tried one or more forms of alternative treatment, and the three forms of treatment most commonly employed were sunbathing (67.5%), vitamin therapies (41.6%), nonprescription tanning device (35.6%).⁴

Alternative medicine is rather expensive, and high cost may be required. There was no significant correlation between the use of alternative treatments and family income in this study, but further study may be needed because of the small sample size. On the other hand, there was a relationship between disease duration and the use of alternative medicine in our study, but no significant correlation in other study⁴.

The findings in this study indicate that the absence of satisfactory long-term effects of physician-provided therapy is the main reason for psoriasis patients trying alternative medicine. This is consistent with the findings of other studies.^{5,8,9} Even if few, "doctors are not concerned enough about my case" is a remarkable answer. Our patients may explore unproven treatments unless we show a sincere concern about their skin disease. "The quality of the patient's relationship with their physician was related inversely to their propensity to seek unorthodox care."¹⁰

Persons without skin disease and the mass media were the main sources of information on alternative medicine for the majority of the patients (except for sunbathing). This is consistent with the findings of other studies.^{5,9} The results of this study emphasize that the mass media need to have a critical attitude to claims of excellent results of any form of therapy.

The efficacy of alternative treatments is generally unknown. Recently, there were efforts to study efficacy of alternative medicine by scientific methods^{11,12}, and many studies have also been published in Asian countries such as Japan and China. Several countries including China have published scientific articles on the proposed mechanism of action of traditional Chinese medicine and further studies are being carried out.¹³ In this study, the numbers of

patients reporting "some improvement" or "good" / "very good" results were low except for sunbathing, as in other similar reports.^{5,8} However, the results regarding the patients' general evaluation of effects do not permit any conclusion as to whether alternative medicine is effective against psoriasis or not. Patients who may have experienced beneficial results of alternative therapy, have less need to attend the clinic and are probably not included in the study. Therefore, the possibility of its therapeutic benefits cannot be ruled out. To practitioners of alternative medicine, we should continue to ask for documentation of the possible effects of alternative medicine or other rationale for its use.

There are relatively few reports of adverse consequences from alternative therapeutic modalities,^{2,14,15} but actual rates of adverse events are unknown. It is a common misconception that natural medications, such as herbal medicine, have no adverse effects due to their natural composition. However, experienced practitioners are aware that herbal remedies can have serious adverse systemic effects such as hepatotoxicity. In this study, 11.6% of the patients who had tried herbal remedies had ever experienced adverse events.

In conclusion, alternative therapies were widely utilized by patients participating in this study, and dermatologists need to continue to be aware of alternative treatments employed by their patients to discover useful information about future therapies and to monitor for adverse effects. In addition, further research to discover the proposed mechanism of action and efficacy of alternative medicine by scientific methods will be needed.

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