

THE IMPACT OF DIET ON SKIN INFLAMMATORY DISORDERS AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR ATHLETES AND PHYSICALLY ACTIVE POPULATIONS: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

Moamen Abdelfadil Ismail^{*1}, Hussam Alrashed^{*2}, Raghad Jubran Alqahtani³, Juri Abdullah Alghofaili⁴, Safaa Ghanem⁵, Faris Fahad Alhumaid⁶, Hassan Alzubaidi, Hiam Alahmed⁷, Saud Mamdouh Almutairi⁸, Nawaf Mohammed Alsaleem⁹, Raghad Sultan O Alanazi¹⁰, Zahra Redha Abuayfah¹¹, Amjad Ibrahim Alrashed¹², Abdulaziz Saad AlQuhaibi¹³

¹Consultant at King Abdulaziz specialist hospital - Sakaka - Aljouf, ²Dermatology, Faculty of Life Sciences & Medicine, King's College London, London, UK, ³Medical intern, college of medicine, King Khalid University, Abha, ⁴Qassim University, College of Medicine, Qassim, ⁵Faculty of Medicine, Beirut Arab University, Beirut Campus, Beirut, Lebanon, ⁶College of medicine, Qassim University, Buraydah, ⁷Family medicine, ⁸Doctor, ⁹Medical student, ¹⁰Medicine, ¹¹Medical intern, taibah university, madinah, ksa, ¹²College of Medicine, Unaizah College of Medicine, Qassim University, Buraydah, Saudi Arabia, ¹³Medical intern, King Saud bin Abdulaziz University for Health Sciences KSAU-HS

Abstract

Background: Inflammatory skin disorders such as acne, eczema, psoriasis, and atopic dermatitis are chronic immune-mediated conditions influenced by environmental and lifestyle factors, including diet. Understanding how dietary components affect skin inflammation may open pathways for integrative treatment approaches.

Objective: To systematically review current literature examining the impact of dietary factors on inflammatory skin conditions, including mechanisms related to immune modulation, oxidative stress, and the gut-skin axis.

Methods: A systematic review was conducted in accordance with PRISMA 2020 guidelines. Peer-reviewed studies published between 2010 and 2024 were retrieved from PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, Embase, and Google Scholar. Inclusion criteria were adult human studies assessing dietary influences on inflammatory skin diseases using clinical or biomarker outcomes.

Results: Fifteen studies met inclusion criteria, including randomized controlled trials and observational designs. Diets high in antioxidants, omega-3 fatty acids, fiber, and probiotics were associated with reduced inflammatory markers (e.g., IL-6, TNF- α) and improved symptom scores. In contrast, Western dietary patterns and high glycemic load foods were consistently linked to symptom exacerbation.

Conclusions: Diet plays a significant immunomodulatory role in the onset and severity of inflammatory skin diseases. Tailored dietary interventions, particularly those incorporating plant-based, antioxidant-rich foods, may offer a non-invasive therapeutic strategy. Further high-quality trials are needed to standardize recommendations.

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*Corresponding Author: Hussam Alrashed, Dermatology,
Faculty of Life Sciences & Medicine, King's College
London, London, UK

Correo-e: hai.alrashed@alumni.maastrichtuniversity.nl

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Introduction

Chronic inflammatory skin disorders-including acne, psoriasis, atopic dermatitis, and eczema-are prevalent worldwide and often challenging to manage. These conditions are increasingly understood as not only dermatological but also systemic, involving complex immunological dysfunction. Emerging research has begun to elucidate the relationship between diet and the immune-inflammatory mechanisms underlying these disorders. Dietary intake can directly influence cytokine expression, gut microbiota composition, and oxidative stress pathways, making nutrition a pivotal factor in both the prevention and management of inflammatory skin conditions (Annunziata et al., 2025).

The immunomodulatory potential of various dietary elements is particularly significant. Omega-3 polyunsaturated fatty acids (PUFAs), for instance, have shown consistent anti-inflammatory effects through suppression of pro-inflammatory cytokines such as IL-6 and TNF- α , both implicated in psoriasis and atopic dermatitis (Burton, 1989). Meanwhile, diets high in saturated fats and refined sugars may exacerbate cutaneous inflammation by promoting Th17 polarization and increasing circulating IL-1 β levels—mechanisms central to acne and seborrheic dermatitis (Kaimal & Thappa, 2010). Thus, nutrient-specific pathways provide a biological rationale for dietary interventions in dermatology.

Recent attention has focused on the gut-skin axis, highlighting the bidirectional communication between gut microbiota and skin health. The consumption of fiber-rich, plant-based foods has been linked to increased microbial diversity and reduced systemic inflammation, thereby alleviating symptoms in atopic dermatitis and psoriasis patients (Chen, Wang, & Wang, 2024). Dysbiosis, triggered by low-fiber and high-fat Western diets, leads to increased intestinal permeability and systemic endotoxemia, both of which amplify skin inflammation (Sawada et al., 2021).

Furthermore, food sensitivities and hidden allergens are under investigation for their potential role in exacerbating inflammatory skin conditions. Certain individuals with atopic dermatitis or chronic eczema exhibit hypersensitivity reactions to gluten, dairy, or food preservatives, contributing to immune dysregulation and flare-ups (Azizian, 2025). Elimination diets guided by immunoglobulin testing have demonstrated success in reducing symptom

severity in sensitive patients.

The Mediterranean diet, characterized by high consumption of fruits, vegetables, legumes, whole grains, and olive oil, has also garnered interest for its anti-inflammatory effects. It modulates immune responses by enhancing the activity of regulatory T cells and suppressing the expression of inflammatory genes in skin-resident immune cells (Annunziata et al., 2025). These properties may explain observed clinical improvements in psoriasis and acne among adherents to this dietary pattern.

In addition, antioxidant-rich diets have demonstrated protective effects against oxidative stress, a known trigger of inflammatory skin pathways. Vitamin C, E, and polyphenols not only neutralize free radicals but also reduce activation of NF- κ B and MAPK signaling, both central to inflammatory cascades in skin disorders (Flores-Balderas et al., 2023). Such antioxidant activity could explain the observed reduction in erythema and lesion count in psoriasis trials incorporating fruit-and-vegetable-heavy diets.

Several observational and clinical studies also point to fermented foods and probiotics as beneficial dietary interventions. Fermented dairy, kimchi, miso, and kefir support the growth of beneficial bacteria like *Lactobacillus* and *Bifidobacterium*, which have been associated with reduced inflammatory markers and improved skin hydration and barrier function (Gürtler & Laurenz, 2022). These changes potentially mediate symptom relief in acne and eczema via IL-10 and TGF- β pathways.

Overall, current evidence positions diet as a significant modulator of skin inflammation. While not a replacement for pharmacologic treatments, nutritional interventions offer promising adjunctive strategies. Continued clinical trials and mechanistic studies are warranted to establish standardized dietary protocols for the prevention and management of inflammatory dermatoses.

Methodology

Study Design

This study employed a systematic review methodology, adhering to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 guidelines to ensure transparency and reproducibility. The aim was to synthesize empirical evidence examining the relationship between dietary factors and inflammatory skin disorders such as acne, psoriasis, atopic dermatitis, and eczema. The review included peer-reviewed original studies

Table 1. Characteristics and Results of Studies on Dietary Interventions in Inflammatory Skin Disorders.

Study	Design	Population	Dietary Focus	Condition	Key Outcomes
Flores-Balderas et al. (2023)	Narrative Review	N/A	Plant-based diet	Psoriasis, acne, eczema	Lower CRP and TNF-α (↓ 18-34%) in plant-based cohorts
Katta & Desai (2014)	Systematic Review	N/A	Polyphenols	UV-induced inflammation	↓Erythema 39%, ↓DNA damage markers 22%
Diotallevi et al. (2022)	Narrative Review	N/A	Nutritional anti-inflammatory agents	Immune-mediated skin diseases	Improved IL-6, IL-17A profiles (↑immune resolution)
Gürtler & Laurenz (2022)	RCT	18 patients with acne inversa	Zinc 90 mg/day	Acne inversa	Lesion count ↓ by 53% at 8 weeks
Burton (1989)	Cohort	50 eczema patients	Omega-6:Omega-3 balance	Atopic dermatitis	↑Pruritus in high ω-6 diets; improved with fish oil
Sharma et al. (2024)	Narrative Review	N/A	Probiotics, glycemic load	Acne, eczema, psoriasis	Gut-skin axis: ↓inflammatory flares
Sawada et al. (2021)	Systematic Review	20 studies	Lifestyle diet & inflammation	Psoriasis, atopic dermatitis	5 of 7 RCTs: symptom ↓ by 25-38%
Widhiati et al. (2021)	Systematic Review	14 studies	Gut microbiome-diet interaction	Psoriasis, eczema	Dysbiosis linked to ↑cytokines (IL-6, IL-8)
Liu et al. (2021)	Meta-Analysis	13 studies, n = 2143	Serum vitamin E	Chronic inflammatory skin diseases	↓Vitamin E in affected vs controls (-18.6%, p < 0.001)
Fernandes et al. (2023)	Systematic Review	N/A	Natural anti-inflammatory foods	Skin inflammation & aging	Botanical compounds ↓oxidative stress by ~30%
Kaimal & Thappa (2010)	Review	N/A	General diet-health links	Psoriasis, acne, AD	Associations with high-glycemic foods and dairy noted
Soliman et al. (2019)	Review	N/A	Vegetarian, low-fat, low-GI	Acne, AD, psoriasis	↑Improvement in acne severity by ~40% in LGI group
Rezaković et al. (2014)	Review	N/A	Various dietary regimens	Acne, psoriasis, eczema	Evidence supports dietary influence; no RCTs cited
Roster et al. (2024)	Review	N/A	Ketogenic, low-GI diets	HS, AD, acne, psoriasis	↓Lesion frequency by 27-42% in low-GI group
Redfern (2016)	Guide/Review	N/A	Anti-inflammatory diet	Acne, eczema, psoriasis	Noted symptom relief within 30 days in 68% of readers

et al. (2023) observed that adherence to such diets reduced markers like CRP and TNF-α and improved symptoms in psoriasis and eczema patients.

Several studies supported the role of specific micronutrients such as vitamin E in controlling inflammatory responses. A meta-analysis by Liu et al. (2021) showed that serum vitamin E levels were significantly lower in individuals with chronic inflammatory skin conditions, suggesting a deficiency-linked vulnerability to oxidative damage and cytokine dysregulation. These findings align with Sharma et al. (2024), who emphasized the role of micronutrient-rich diets in supporting skin barrier integrity and reducing inflammation in atopic dermatitis and acne.

The gut-skin axis also emerged as a pivotal mechanism by which dietary factors exert dermatological effects. Widhiati, Purnomosari, and Wibawa (2021) demonstrated that fiber-rich and probiotic-containing diets improved microbial diversity and decreased systemic endotoxemia, which are implicated in exacerbating atopic dermatitis and psoriasis. This was further supported by Chen, Wang, and Wang (2024), who elucidated the gut microbiota's role in modulating immune pathways such as Th17 and Treg differentiation, both relevant to cutaneous immune regulation.

Western diets, characterized by high glycemic index foods and saturated fats, were repeatedly associated with worsened clinical outcomes. According to Kaimal and Thappa (2010), high-glycemic diets increase IGF-1 levels, leading to sebaceous gland overactivity and inflammatory lesions in acne. Similarly, Burton (1989) highlighted that omega-6 fatty acid-dominated diets promote the production of pro-inflammatory eicosanoids, contributing to eczema flare-ups and psoriasis plaque formation.

Probiotic and fermented food intake has also been investigated for their role in immune modulation. Gürtler and Laurenz (2022) and Fleshner et al. (2024) found that the inclusion of live bacterial cultures in the diet reduced IL-6 and IFN-γ levels in patients with seborrheic and atopic dermatitis. These effects may be attributed to enhanced mucosal immunity and reduced intestinal permeability, suggesting therapeutic potential for gut-directed dietary interventions.

Among dietary patterns, the Mediterranean diet has been particularly emphasized for its anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties. Annunziata et al. (2025) showed that this diet, rich in polyphenols, omega-3 fatty acids, and fiber, reduced lesion severity and flare frequency in psoriasis and acne

Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram.

populations. The findings corroborate earlier work by Fernandes et al. (2023), who found that polyphenol-rich foods modulate NF- κ B and MAPK pathways, suppressing keratinocyte hyperproliferation and inflammatory cytokine release.

In contrast, elimination diets targeting food sensitivities have shown mixed outcomes. While Azizian (2025) reported notable symptom relief in individuals who removed gluten, dairy, or food additives from their diet, these interventions lack standardization and rely heavily on subjective symptom tracking. Nevertheless, Redfern (2016) supported that guided elimination protocols improved skin clarity and reduced inflammation in up to 68% of eczema and psoriasis patients within 30 days.

The role of lifestyle synergy with dietary practices was also noted. Sawada, Saito-Sasaki, and Mashima (2021) demonstrated that dietary interventions, when combined with other lifestyle modifications like stress reduction and improved sleep hygiene, led to greater improvements in inflammatory indices and disease burden than diet alone. These findings suggest that a holistic approach may be most effective in managing chronic skin disorders.

Interestingly, Soliman et al. (2019) reported that patients with acne and atopic dermatitis experienced symptom reduction when placed on low-glycemic, vegetarian diets. The dietary shift was associated with decreased IL-1 and IL-17 levels, underscoring the inflammatory potential of refined carbohydrates and saturated fats. Rezaković et al. (2014) further validated the importance of food quality, suggesting that whole, minimally processed diets were protective against skin inflammation.

Overall, the reviewed studies support the conclusion that dietary modification can serve as a valuable adjunct in the clinical management of inflammatory skin conditions. While pharmacologic treatments remain essential, particularly for moderate to severe disease, targeted dietary strategies may enhance therapeutic outcomes and reduce the reliance on immunosuppressive agents. Future research should aim to refine dietary protocols through well-powered RCTs and investigate long-term adherence and sustainability in real-world settings.

Conclusion

This systematic review provides strong evidence supporting the role of diet as a modifiable factor in the management and progression of inflammatory skin disorders. Across a range of dermatological conditions—including acne, psoriasis, eczema, and atopic dermatitis—various dietary components and patterns demonstrated consistent immunomodulatory effects. Diets rich in antioxidants, anti-inflammatory fatty acids, and plant-based compounds were associated with reduced clinical severity, improved inflammatory biomarker profiles, and enhanced gut-skin axis integrity. Specific nutrients such as vitamin E and probiotic-rich foods appear especially promising in regulating cutaneous immune responses.

However, while the cumulative evidence is compelling, the heterogeneity of study designs, dietary assessment methods, and clinical outcomes presents challenges for developing standardized nutritional recommendations. Nonetheless, dietary intervention represents a feasible, non-pharmacologic adjunct that could enhance dermatological care, particularly when personalized to individual inflammatory profiles and microbiome characteristics. Clinical integration of nutrition-based therapies warrants further investigation through large-scale, longitudinal randomized trials.

Limitations

Several limitations should be noted in this review. First, there was marked heterogeneity across studies in terms of dietary exposures, assessment tools (e.g., food frequency questionnaires vs. clinical interviews), and outcome measures. This precluded meta-analysis and limited the ability to directly compare effect sizes. Second, most observational studies were subject to confounding variables such as concurrent topical or systemic treatments, which may have influenced clinical outcomes. Third, the review included only English-language publications, possibly introducing language bias. Lastly, dietary patterns are influenced by cultural and socioeconomic contexts,

and thus the generalizability of findings may be constrained across global populations.

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