

Alitretinoin – the first retinoid for the treatment of chronic hand eczema

Prof. Dr. med. Dr. h.c. Thomas Ruzicka
Head of the department of Dermatology and Allergology
Ludwig-Maximilian-University of Munich

Chronic hand eczema represents a major problem in everyday's dermatological practice. Approximately 7 % of the population are estimated to suffer from this disease, which can cause major morbidity, as well as high costs to society. Occupational disability may occur in a large number of cases.

Chronic hand eczema may have different causes, such as atopy, contact with irritants and allergens, but many cases have to be classified as idiopathic. Besides the etiologic heterogeneity, there is also a marked variability in the clinical presentation. Dyshidrotic, (vesicular) eczema, hyperkeratotic - rhagadiform type, or finger tip eczema are a few examples.

Recent reviews on therapeutic options revealed an astonishingly low number of controlled trials for chronic hand eczema, despite the frequency of the disease. For very few therapeutics, sufficient evidence exists to support their therapeutic facts. No drug has so far been registered for the systemic treatment. For the topical therapy, glucocorticosteroids represent the most of effective option, but due to their negative effects on the skin barrier function they exert negative effects in the long term. Ultraviolet treatment is widely used, but is not effective in all cases, and requires special equipment and expertise. It is also time consuming for the patients.

Therefore, the discovery of the therapeutic action of the pan-retinoid receptor agonist alitretinoin represents a major step forward. With doses between 10 mg and 30 mg daily a large majority of patients achieves full or almost complete remission. Retreatment with a drug shows the same efficacy – tachyphylaxis has not been observed. In a large international multicentre double-blind, placebo controlled trial, the drug showed good tolerability with only mild to moderate retinoid – class side effects.

The available evidence suggests that alitretinoin holds a great promise for the treatment of chronic hand eczema.

