

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE


### ***Sa'fe* Disease: Its Symptoms and Treatment in Medical Sources of Islamic Middle Ages**

#### **Abstract**

*Sa'fe* disease is one of the skin diseases that has caught the attention of physicians of the Islamic ages. An ulcer on the head with small and scattered pimples has been regarded as the most significant symptom of this disease, sometimes making the patient's face red. Generally, the condition is classified into two categories, dry and wet, with specific symptoms and treatments. The most significant signs of this disease include dry ulcers on the scalp and much dandruff, sometimes leading to baldness. The general treatment of this disease, which primarily affects the head and sometimes the face, includes blood collection in leprosy, cupping and leech therapy, regular washing with medicines and preparation of all kinds of poultices and oral medication. It should be noted that it is more common on the head and sometimes on the face. This disease is more prevalent in children than adults. Accordingly, this study was conducted to explain *Sa'fe* condition and mention the various symptoms and treatments stated in Islamic medical sources to remove this disease using the library method.

**Key words:** Medicine in the Islamic Ages, Skin diseases, *Sa'fe*, Physicians, Ulcer

Received: 18 Feb 2022; Accepted: 18 May 2022; Online published: 15 Aug 2022  
**Research on History of Medicine/ 2022 Aug; 11(3): 213-220.**

Javad Ghazi Sha'rbaf<sup>1</sup> 

1- Ph.D., Assistant professor, Department of Islamic History & Civilization, Faculty of Theology, Azarbaijan Shahid Madani University, Tabriz, Iran

#### **Correspondence:**

Javad Ghazi Sha'rbaf  
Ph.D., Assistant professor, Department of Islamic History & Civilization, Faculty of Theology, Azarbaijan Shahid Madani University, Tabriz, Iran

[javadghazi.sh@gmail.com](mailto:javadghazi.sh@gmail.com)

#### **Citation:**

Ghazi Sha'rbaf J. *Sa'fe* Disease: Its Symptoms and Treatment in Medical Sources of Islamic Middle Ages. *Res Hist Med.* 2022; 11(3): 213-220.



## Introduction

Humans have developed different diseases due to various natural hazards since early habitation on land, and typically, they have tried to treat them. The advent of civilizations caused them to try to treat this disease using independent medical knowledge. Skin diseases were also considered due to the various dangers such as cold and war among the multiple conditions of the human organs that ancient physicians tried to identify and treat. These diseases have been considered and examined in Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, Rome, India, China and Iran's civilizations. Considering skin diseases in ancient Iran date back to Zand Avesta (518 BC), conditions such as pimples, itchy skin, various ulcers and leprosy have been considered and mentioned (see Mukhopadhyay, 2007, pp. 7 - 12).

The advent of Islam caused medicine to be considered one of the most important sciences for Muslims. Physicians tried to introduce the type and symptoms to detect different diseases and identify the ways to prevent them during the Islamic era. Also, they examined the symptoms of illnesses to find a way to diagnose and treat them with various medicines. It is evident that Islamic medical sources have significantly considered skin diseases. Islamic physicians have studied skin diseases in multiple categories.

A class of skin diseases that have been described in addition to other conditions, such as smallpox, typhoid, different types of inflammation such as cancer, and leprosy; categories of viral and infectious diseases such as *sa'fe*; other class of conditions such as urticaria, pruritus, and eczema; other class of conditions that change the colour of the skin, such as psoriasis; categories related to skin membrane diseases such as haemorrhoids and diseases of the genital tract and illnesses related to the lips and the final variety of diseases related to skin parts such as nails and hair such as baldness (for more information about the description of this division, see Qasim Mohammad, 2002, pp. 180-189).

As it was explained, *sa'fe* (in modern medicine called: Dermatophytosis or Ringworm) disease is among the second class of these diseases, i.e., viral and infectious diseases that many physicians of the Islamic era have highly considered. Physicians have introduced the disease and the types and symptoms of each kind in their works and suggested effective treatments in the form of oral, washing ways, and blood sampling (in the form of venipuncture, cupping, phlebotomy, and leech therapy), and poultices according to each type. There is no independent research on this subject despite the widespread discussion of *sa'fe* disease in the medical sources of the Islamic era. There is only one article about this subject, entitled Diagnosis and Treatment of *Sa'fe* Disease in Safavid Iran, which examined this disease in the medical sources of the Safavid era. Accordingly, this article tries to introduce and detect symptoms of this disease in medical books of the Islamic Middle Ages and then find their various treatments.

## Introducing the disease

In modern medicine, Ringworm is a common infection of the skin and nails caused by fungus. The disease is called "*Ringworm*" because it can cause an itchy, red, circular rash. Ringworm is also called "*tinea*" or "*dermatophytosis*". The different types of Ringworm are usually named for the location of the infection on the body. This disease is also mentioned in the texts of Islamic medicine, which is called *Sa'fe*. *Sa'fe* disease





is called *Shirineh*<sup>1</sup> (Jorjani, 1990, p. 244; Jorjani, 2012, Vol. 7, p. 32), Shironeh and Shirinak in Persian (Nafisi, n.d., pp. 2112-2113; Qamari Bukhari, 2008, p. 112). Razi (d. 916 AD) has considered it as a disease in *Al-Mansouri fi al-Tab*, in several positions where an ulcer emerges on the skin (Razi, 2008, pp. 141, 194, 290) and even has equated it with baldness and called it *wild baldness* (Razi, 2008, p. 780). Jorjani (d. 1137 AD) has confirmed the baldness caused by this disease (Jorjani, 1990, p. 244). Razi has explained that this disease is specific to winter due to the dry weather of this season (Razi, 2008, p. 294). Accordingly, the ulcer of *Sa'fe* infection is dry (Qamari Bukhari, 2008, p. 60). Some physicians have considered that *Sa'fe* includes head ulcers and explained that it contains small and scattered pimples (Azdi, 2008, p. 631). Other physicians have rejected the restriction of this ulcer to the patient's head and explained that the disease could be in all organs of the body and sunken in the flesh and especially in the hair follicles in different organs, including the scalp (Jorjani, 2012, Vol. 7, p. 32; Ganjineh Baharestan, 2007, Vol. 2, p. 115; Bahaodoleh, 2003, p. 138; Shah Arzani, 2008, p. 1151; Qaderi, 2008, p. 193). Children develop this disease more than adults (Ganjineh Baharestan, 2007, Vol. 1, p. 454). In a general classification, this disease is divided into two categories dry and wet. In the recent type, scurf, such as severe dandruff, turn down the patient's head (Ganjineh Baharestan, 2007, Vol. 2, p. 115).

### Symptoms

Physicians related to the Islamic ages have recognized various symptoms in patients who suffer from *Sa'fe*. One of the most significant symptoms is dry ulcers on the scalp and face (Razi, 2008, pp. 141, 194, 290; Jorjani, 2002, p. 224; Shah Arzani, 2008, p. 1151). The face's redness, pimples, and small holes are also diagnosed as other significant symptoms (Razi, 2008, p. 294; Jorjani, 2002, p. 224; Qaderi, 2008, p. 193). Another symptom is eyelash loss which happens when the disease has affected the eye area (Jorjani, 2002, p. 224; Jorjani, 2012, Vol. 6, p. 232; Jorjani, 1966, p. 318). There are different symptoms in one of the types of *Sa'fe*, including smashing the patient's flesh and burning, itching and pain (for more information, see Bahaodoleh, 2002, p. 138).

The pimples become like breast nipples, and blood-like secretion takes out in the acute type of this disease, which there is no treatment (Shah Arzani, 2008, p. 1154; Qaderi, 2008, p. 193). If the pores caused by the disease become opener

1- Elsewhere, of course, Jorjani distinguishes between *Shirineh* and *Sa'feh* and considers them to be two different diseases (see Jorjani, 2012, Vol. 7, p. 32).



and the amount of secretion from them increases, it will be called “*Shahdiyeh*”, that skin experiences much more damage, and consequently, its treatment is more complex (Ibn Hindu, 1989, p. 284; Shah Arzani, 2008, p. 1153).

According to CDC's (Center for Disease Control and Prevention) it results in a red, itchy, scaly, circular rash. Hair loss may occur in the area affected (Havlickova, Czaika and Friedrich, 2008, p. 2).

### Treatment

Various medicines have been prescribed to treat *sa'fe* diseases that have been considered short-term and, in most cases, curable (Razi, 2008, p. 780). Sometimes, the specific treatment cases of this disease have been mentioned, and sometimes, it has been noted along with treating other skin diseases.<sup>2</sup> However, the medicines of *sa'fe* treatment are oral, various methods of blood sampling, poultice, and washing of ulcer sites caused by the disease<sup>3</sup>, and sometimes these methods have been mentioned as mixed ways.<sup>4</sup>

#### 1- Oral treatments

Various oral medicines have been mentioned to treat *sa'fe* in the medical sources of the Islamic era. Therefore, one of the first mentioned treatments is to take the *Atrifel* drug, which is a combination of *Amele*, *Halileh* and *Balileh* in specific amounts (for more information, see Abu Ali, 2009, p. 67; Jorjani, 2012, Vol. 10., p. 462; Aqili Alavi Shirazi, n.d., p. 760). Antidote *Laghiri*, one of the antidotes, has been mentioned as another oral medicine to treat this disease. The antidote found in Zabulistan had a bitter and disgusting taste, and the degree of bitterness was such that the consumer felt suffocated (Biruni, 2004, p. 360). Another oral medicine is broad bean, the type called *Lupine* used to treat this disease (Heravi, 1967, p. 81). The bean in other compounds for treating this disease is also used (see Yousefi Heravi, 2003, p. 119). *Ghatel Abiyeh* is another hot and dry plant with various properties. It has also been considered beneficial for treating *Sa'fe* (Heravi, 1967, p. 260). It should be noted that the patient's diet plan during the treatment period has no salinity, sweetness and spiciness, and the patient should eat tasteless valuable foods (Razi, 2008, pp. 290-291).

#### 2- Ulcer washing

Islamic physicians have another suggestion to accelerate the treatment of this disease, including regular washing and

2- For example, some drugs have been prescribed for the treatment of diseases such as *Ghuba*, which is a kind of inflammation in the penis (Akhaveini, 1992, p. 591; Avicenna, 2005, p. 1426) or Razi has prescribed his treatments about *sa'fe* in treatments related to blister (Razi, 2008, p. 299).

3- In addition to these cases mentioned in various books, Jorjani has suggested some types of suppositories for the treatment of *sa'fe* s (for more information, see Jorjani, 2012, Vol. 6, p. 232; Jorjani, 1966, p. 318).

4- For example, Razi considered continuous bathing and using luke-warm water and phlebotomizing forehead vein and then putting leeches and also scratching the place so that it bleeds and then rubbing with salt and vinegar and then applying red ointment is one of the effective treatments for this disease. (Razi, 2008, pp. 290-291).





bagging of ulcers (Razi, 2008, p. 140). If the ulcer is complicated, it should be scraped with an iron or other hard object to be bloody, then washed with vinegar, salt and soapy water and then leeches (Shah Arzani, 2008, p. 1152; Nazem Jahan, 2008, p. 429; Khosravi, 2002, p. 291). It is recommended that ulcers be washed with soapy water or with vinegar and salt in the treatment of a type of *Sa'fe* called "*Shahdieh*" (see the present article, previous lines), and after cleaning it with cotton, pour the rust inside it to remove infections and dry and destroy the secretion inside the ulcers (Shah Arzani, 2018, p. 1153). *Sa'fe* has another type called "*Reus al-Abreh*" appearing in the root of the hair. It can be treated by phlebotomy, giving aperient to the patient, then cutting hair, taking anti-disease medicines, and regular washing. If the patient's hair is also affected by *Sa'fe*, it will be suggested to wash the hair with cedar and then lubricate the area with flower oil and rub the crushed lily leaf. After repeating three or four times, the patient will be improved (Nazem Jahan, 2008, p. 429). Animal excrement has been considered another beneficial prescription recommended by Islamic physicians. According to Heravi, the excrement of all animals is hot and dry, but the excrement of hot temperament animals is warmer, and if the patient's head is washed with it, it can ward off scalp infections (Heravi, 1967, p. 296). Hakim Mo'men (alive in the 11th century AH) found that human excrement can be a valuable medicine for *sa'fe* treatment (Hakim Mo'men, 2011, p. 220).

### 3- Rubbing and applying various ointments and poultices on the ulcer

Physicians of the Islamic Middle Ages prescribed various ointments and poultices to treat *sa'fe*. Jorjani explains that it can be beneficial to solve the burnt dried coriander, baked pottery, and henna in vinegar and apply them with flower oil and rub it on the patient's position to treat this disease (Jorjani, 2012, Vol. 7, pp. 32-33). Another *Sa'fe* treatment is combining the old depilatory with salt and vinegar (for more information, see Ganjineh Baharestan, 2007, Vol. 1, p. 454). Moreover, the combination of henna, turmeric, mordaseng, pomegranate peel and its mixture with vinegar and oil flower has been explained that can be an effective way to treat children (Ganjineh Baharestan, 2007, Vol. 1, p. 454; Shah Arzani, 2018, p. 1152). Another medicinal case is Jel Nib oil. It should be mixed with white sesame oil water after squeezing it and then cooked until the water burns and rubbed on the place to achieve more effect (Nazem Jahan, 2004, p. 161). Vitriol is another famous ointment with a hot and dry temperament that stops bleeding and can be used as a dryer for ulcers caused by *Sa'fe* (Razi, 2018, p. 215). This medicine, which was cultivated in Egypt, is astringent and irritating, and it can cure *Sa'fe* in addition to its various properties (Heravi, 1967, p. 176). Razi mentioned the properties of *Ghara al-Jaloud* (Gelatin) and stated its effect on the treatment of *Sa'fe*. Moreover, he considered the use of turmeric a useful ointment (Razi, 2018, p. 231). Also, Mowaffaq Ibn Ali Heravi (d. 5th century AH) mentioned this treatment (Heravi, 1967, p. 234). Additionally, it is beneficial to rub soap on the ulcer, leave it until it burns, and then wash it with warm water, although the latter should be repeated several times (Razi, 2008, pp. 290-291).

### 4- Types of blood sampling

Blood sampling in phlebotomy, wet cupping, and leech therapy has been considered one of the effective ways of treating *Sa'fe* in many ancient medical sources. Razi has mentioned blood sampling from the chin and head as one of the treatments of *Sa'fe* (Razi,





2018, pp. 290-291). Phlebotomy of the head vein is another recommended treatment to remove the relevant infections (Razi, 2018, p. 374; Ganjineh Baharestan, 2007, Vol. 1, p. 454; Heravi, 1967, p. 236; Ibn Elias Shirazi, n.d., p. 191). Also, Shah Arzani (d. 11th century AH) in Akbari medicine has recommended phlebotomy of the arm (Ghifal) and blood sampling from the forehead. He believed that if the patient is a child or a weak person, this blood sampling should be done through cupping or leech therapy, and after removing the blood, they should soften the ulcer with baked halilah and shahtra and give the patient things like egg yolk to strengthen them (Shah Arzani, 2008, p. 1152). Of course, Razi has also prescribed leech therapy as a beneficial spice. He considers leech use to be beneficial when the ulcer caused by *Sa'fe* is old and hardened, and of course, it will be more helpful if this is done after emptying the body with phlebotomizing and lubricants (Razi, 2008, p. 381). Other physicians have regarded Leech therapy to treat *Sa'fe*. Jorjani points out in the *Zakhireye Khwarezmshahi* that leech therapy is beneficial in diseases occurring on the skin surface and also mentions the name of *Sa'fe* in the examples. He explains that the patient's body should be cleansed of impurities by phlebotomy or aperients before leech therapy (Jorjani, 2012, Vol. 3, p. 655). Leech therapy has been considered a suitable method to treat various skin diseases, including *Sa'fe* in recent centuries, in the book *Elm al-Abdan* (Ali Khan, 1928, p. 157).

There is another treatment for dry *Sa'fe*, which is known as dandruff, and from which white scurf was removed (Shah Arzani, 2003, p. 1152) was the phlebotomy of the vein behind the ear and rubbing its blood on the ulcer and then waiting for a therapeutic effect with a combination of medicines. Also, it is recommended to perform phlebotomy simultaneously and to cup in *Sa'fe* where the ulcer was still wet and, in that case, they were applied with hybrid medicines (for more information, see Jorjani, 1990, p. 240; Jorjani, 2002, p. 192; Shah Arzani, 2008, p. 1152). The patient with *Sa'fe* should not have sexual intercourse (Shah Arzani, 2008, p. 1152), which can be due to the patient's extreme weakness caused by blood sampling. Jorjani has suggested blood sampling through cupping as an effective treatment. According to him, if it is caused by blood, the Ghifal vein (arm) should be phlebotomized, then blood should be taken from it, and the patient should undergo cupping on both sides of the neck. If it was not enough and did not improve, the forehead vein should also be phlebotomized. If *Sa'fe* is dry, the vein behind the ear should be phlebotomized, and the blood should be rubbed on the ulcer, and a red ointment of substances such as turmeric, vinegar, and olive oil should be then applied to it. Warm bran and beet leaves should also be backed in vinegar and water, the patient's head should be washed with it, and violet oil, lotus oil and pumpkin seed oil should be distilled in the patient's nose (Jorjani, 2012, Vol. 7, pp. 32-33).

Another type of the disease is called "*Sa'fe Hamra*", Galen is also referred to as a condition when the scalp is shaved, the head turns red, and its redness turns a little black. This type of *Sa'fe* can be treated by phlebotomizing the arm vein (Ghifal) and using another common spice that should be used orally as a poultice. Sometimes this type of *Sa'fe* affects the face. It can be treated by leech therapy, bathing, and the phlebotomy of Ghifal and forehead vein and nasal vein (orbital). After blood sampling, using warm water regularly can be highly beneficial. Also, it is required to use the tonic spice to restore the patient's strength after the phlebotomy and use an aperient herb (for more information, see Shah Arzani, 2008, p. 1154).





### Conclusion

Consequently, there is considerable accuracy in medical sources of the Islamic era about the general introduction, symptoms, and various treatments of *Sa'fe* disease. The physicians of this period believed that this disease is more prevalent in children than adults and has multiple complications that sometimes provide many problems for the patient. In modern medicine, the closest skin disease to *Sa'fe* is Dermatophytosis, also known as Ringworm, a fungal skin infection. One of the complications of this disease is forming a dry ulcer on the scalp and face along with much dandruff and, in many cases, causes hair loss (baldness) at the ulcer site. If it is in the eye, it can cause shedding eyelashes. Redness of the face and different kinds of pimples is another complication caused by this disease. In some types of disease, secretions taken out of the pores caused by this disease are difficult to treat. This disease can be treated using several treatments in ancient medical sources. Frequent washing and bagging on the ulcer site have been highly emphasized in addition to oral treatments such as Atrifle, antidote Laghiri, bean, and Ghatel Abiye. If the ulcer is extremely dry, it is strongly recommended to clean it with a hard object such as iron and wash it with vinegar and salt. Ointments are also considered essential medicines to treat *Sa'fe*. There are many ointments in ancient medical sources, sometimes in turmeric, alum, and animal excrement, and sometimes as a combination of different medicines. Blood sampling is another treatment that has been mentioned in phlebotomy, cupping, and leech therapy; consequently, it has been emphasized that the patient, especially children, power should be restored with spices and food.

### Conflict of Interest

None.

### References

- Abu Ali., 2009. *Properties of things*. Translated by Muhammad ibn Zakaria al-Razi. Qom: Islamic Reserves Association.
- Akhaveini, R., 1992. *Hedaya Al-Motaalemin Fi Al-Teb*. Mashhad: Ferdowsi University of Mashhad.
- Ali Khan, W., 1890. *Elm Al-Abdan*. Lakhanu: Monshi Noulkashur.
- Aqili Alavi Shirazi, M., n.d. *Gharabadin Kabir*. Vol. 1. Tehran: Tehran University of Medical Sciences and Health Services, Institute of Medical History, Islamic and Complementary Medicine.
- Avicenna, H., 2005. *The law in medicine*. Vol. 2. Beirut: Dar Al-Ahya Al-Tarath Al-Arabi.
- Azdi, A', 2008. *Ketab Al-Ma'a*. Vol. 2. Tehran: Iran University of Medical Sciences, Institute of Medical History, Islamic and Complementary Medicine.
- Bahaodoleh, B., 2003. *Summary of experiences*. Tehran: Iran University of Medical Sciences.
- Biruni, A', 2004. *Al-Sideneh Fi Al-Teb* (Pharmacology in medicine). Translated by B. Mozaffarzadeh. Tehran: Academy of Persian Language and Literature.
- Ganjineh Baharestan*, 2007. Vols. 1 and 2. Tehran: Library of the Museum and Documentation Center of the Islamic Consultative Assembly.
- Hakim Mo'men, M., 2011. *Tahgha Al-Momenin*. Vol. 1. Qom: Noor Vahy.
- Havlickova, B., Czaika V.A., and Friedrich M., 2008. Epidemiological trends in skin mycoses worldwideexternal icon. *Mycoses*, 51(Suppl 4), pp. 2-15.





Heravi, M., 1967. *Al-Abniye 'An Haghaegh Al-Adviya (Roza Al-Ons Va Manfaat Al-Nafs)*. Tehran: University of Tehran.

Ibn Elias Shirazi, n.d. *Kafayeh Mansouri*. Tehran: Iran University of Medical Sciences, Institute of Medical History Studies, Islamic and Complementary Medicine.

Ibn Hindu, 1989. *Miftah al-tibb wa-minhaj al-tullab*. M. Mohaghegh, M.T. Daneshpajuh, eds. Tehran: Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University Tehran Branch, in collaboration with Tehran University.

Jorjani, I., 1966. *Al-Aghraz Al-Tabiya Valmabahes Al-Alaeiye*. Tehran: Iranian Culture Foundation.

Jorjani, I., 1990. *Khafi Alaei*. Tehran: Etelaat.

Jorjani, I., 2002. *Memory in medical knowledge and pharmacy*. Tehran: Institute for Islamic Studies, McGill University, University of Tehran.

Jorjani, I., 2012. *Zakhiriye Khwarazmshahi*. Vols. 3, 6, 7 and 10. Qom: Institute of Revival of Natural Medicine.

Khosravi, M., 2002. *Traditional medicine of Sina, treatment of various diseases with medicinal plants*. Tehran: Mohammad Publishing.

Mukhopadhyay, A., 2007. *History Of Dermatology, In India Till Date*, Thesis Submitted to the Gujarat University, In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirments for the Degree of in Dematology, Venereology and Leprology (Under the Faculty of Medicine).

Nafisi, M., n.d. *Farhang-e-Nafisi*. Vol. 3. Tehran: Khayyam.

Nazem Jahan, M., 2004. *Gharabadin Azam*. Tehran: Iran University of Medical Sciences.

Nazem Jahan, M., 2008. *Eksir Azam*. Vol. 4. Tehran: Iran University of Medical Sciences, Institute of Medical History Studies, Islamic and Complementary Medicine.

Qaderi, A., 2008. *The chapters of the diseases (explanation of the book of the limits of diseases, Hakim Arzani)*. Tehran: Iran University of Medical Sciences.

Qamari Bukhari, H., 2008. *Ketab Al-Tanvir*. Tehran: Iran University of Medical Sciences.

Qasim Mohammad, M., 2002. *Skin diseases according to physicians: Arabs and Muslims*. *Afaq al-Thaqafa and Al-Tarath*, 40, pp. 180-189.

Razi, M., 2008. *Al-Mansouri in medicine*. Translated by M.I. Zakir. Tehran: Tehran University of Medical Sciences.

Shah Arzani, 2008. *Akbari Medicine*. Vol. 2. Qom: Jalaluddin.

Yousefi Heravi, Y., 2003. *Yousefi medicine (Jame Al-Favaed)*. Tehran: Iran University of Medical Sciences.

