

'After years of pain, I've finally got my life back'

Chronic eczema of her hand made Denise Hyland's life a misery – until she tried a new drug. Jane Kelly reports

When Denise Hyland, an English teacher in Greenwich, south-east London, took to wearing a black silk glove in the classroom, the pupils were impressed: after all, Michael Jackson had worn something similar. But when she took the glove off, the reaction changed. "When they saw my hand they called it 'the lurgy,'" she recalls.

Denise, who is 58, had chronic hand eczema, a condition that suddenly appeared nearly eight years ago and went on to blight her life. "I was washing up when I felt a searing pain in my right palm. At first I thought it was caused by the washing-up liquid," she recalls.

Over the next few months, her right hand became painfully inflamed, with red raw cracks appearing over her entire palm and the front of her thumb. It was the beginning of a pattern. "After a month, my hand would become dry and itchy," she says. "Then it peeled and turned scaly. This was followed by yellow blisters, cracks, bleeding and weeping. The cells would try to repair my hand by producing thick, rhino-like skin. That would

then peel off, leaving soft skin for a short time before the whole thing started again."

Six million people in the UK are estimated to suffer from this debilitating skin condition. As with other types of eczema, the skin becomes inflamed and broken, causing symptoms such as flaking, itchiness and blisters. Until recently, one in five cases of hand eczema was untreatable. Now a drug called alitretinoin, the first to be developed for hand eczema, is available. Research shows it can help almost 50 per cent of patients who have not responded to other treatments.

Hand eczema can be triggered by a combination of factors, including genetic make-up and, in particular, contact with irritant or allergenic substances at work: high-risk jobs include hairdressing, catering and dentistry. According to Ian Coulson, a consultant dermatologist at Burnley General Hospital, it is the third most common cause of people taking time off work in the UK (just behind backache and stress): an "enormous economic problem" he says.

In Denise's case the cause of the eczema and why it affected only her right hand remains a

mystery. "I had slight eczema in my ears when I was 11. I also have type 2 diabetes and there may be a link to that. One consultant said it was caused by the menopause."

Denise is naturally right-handed, so not being able to use the hand fully made life miserable. "When the rhino skin starts you lose all flexibility," she continues. "I couldn't open jars, lift things into the oven or stir pans. It felt as if my hand was on fire, and I couldn't sleep at night."

Depression is common in sufferers. "My social life died," says Denise. "I avoided shaking hands with anyone new and wore a glove in the classroom because I was so embarrassed. I also felt embarrassed for my children [Luke, 13, and Giny, 15] when they invited friends home for dinner. I had an open wound which I had to tend day and night."

Denise began a frantic hunt for help from skin specialists. As well as moisturisers and steroid creams – standard treatments for eczema – her doctor tried her on PUVA (psoralen plus UVA). This ultraviolet light treatment reduces the exaggerated immune response that can trigger certain types of eczema.

She also tried two powerful drugs. Nothing worked. In desperation, she visited an alternative practitioner living in Spain. "He gave me a list of at least 50 foods to avoid," she says. "I couldn't keep it up."

Denise's story has a happy ending. She was finally prescribed alitretinoin (brand name **Toctino**®) which has been approved by the National Institute for Health and Clinical excellence (Nice) as the first treatment for chronic severe hand eczema where topical treatments have not worked. Denise took the tablets daily for four months, by which time the eczema had cleared. Whether it will return is uncertain.

Alitretinoin can have side effects – Denise had a slight sensitivity under her left breast. The drug is not suitable for everyone. According to Nice, its use should be monitored by a dermatologist or a doctor experienced in treating severe hand eczema and in using this type of drug.

Margaret Cox, chief executive of the Eczema Society, says many people's lives are made impossible by hand eczema. "They often can't work, can't dress themselves, can't hand over money in shops, and this drug has transformed their



lives," she says.

Denise's main feeling is relief. "I've finally got my life back," she says.

Contact the National Eczema Society; www.eczema.org; 0800 089 1122

For more on hand eczema, visit www.myhandeczema.co.uk



CLARA MOLDEN

Relieved: after four months on a new drug, Denise Hyland, above, is now clear of her chronic hand eczema

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