



Source: Metro Midlands (Birmingham) {Main}  
Edition:  
Country: UK  
Date: Monday 12, September 2011  
Page: 20,21  
Area: 614 sq. cm  
Circulation: ABC 92487 Daily  
BRAD info: page rate £5,807.20, scc rate £21.35  
Phone: 0121 236 7290  
Keyword: National Eczema Society

**durrants**  
Gorkana Group

# Tormented by the itch

**Under the skin: The workplace can be a hazardous and harmful environment for many eczema sufferers but sadly, little is being done to address the problem, says NILUFER ATIK**

**F**or the millions who suffer from eczema in Britain, the end of summer won't just mean having to pack away the barbecue. The drop in temperature, coupled with a reduction in relief-giving UV rays, can often exacerbate the condition, meaning months of torturous scratching in a bid to alleviate the interminable itchiness.

Staying indoors won't offer much respite either, with dust mites – another irritant – raising their ugly heads the minute the central heating goes on and the harsh chemicals in cleaning products used around the home aggravating the skin.

Some sufferers may hope the distraction of work will provide a temporary escape but according to recent research, this isn't necessarily so. In fact, a person's workplace may be the very thing that triggers the condition.

The National Eczema Society (NES) has revealed that a staggering 80 per cent of newly diagnosed work-related skin problems are cases of eczema caused by exposure to irritant substances. Jobs that carry a high risk include hairdressing, catering, dentistry, nursing, construction and any other professions that involve repeated exposure to chemicals and irritants.

'People can seriously underestimate the devastating impact eczema can have on sufferers' everyday lives,' says NES chairwoman

Margaret Cox (pictured), 'It's not just itchy skin; it's painful and debilitating, and can affect a person's self-esteem. It impacts on a person's social life and relationships, because of the fear of how others will react to such a visible condition. Sufferers also face many challenges within the working environment – like the fabric a uniform is made from, the temperature of the office or exposure to irritant substances.'

Six million people in Britain suffer from eczema, which is characterised by itchy, red, flaky skin. It is usually seasonal and tends to flare up in extremes of temperature. The majority of sufferers say their condition improves in the summer and tends to get worse in the winter. But for some, it can worsen in the summer months. There are several causes of eczema but the most common are related to allergies, known as contact dermatitis.

Sufferers are told to stay away from detergents, soaps and bubble baths.

Conventional remedies include steroid creams and anti-histamines, while alternative treatments include evening primrose oil and oatmeal. But these only treat the symptoms and aren't a cure.

'Most cases can be prevented by wearing protective gloves and avoiding contact with triggering substances,' says Cox. 'The key thing is to seek medical help at an early stage and not to give up

hope. Treatments have advanced in recent years and there is help out there.'

Research shows 20 per cent of hand eczema sufferers experience prolonged sick leave and a similar number have had to leave their jobs because of the condition.

John Fuller, 34, from Shipley, West Yorkshire, has suffered from eczema for 13 years. At times, his

condition has been so extreme that he's been hospitalised. He had to leave his job in publishing and become self-employed after realising the dust and cleaning products used in his work environment made his skin worse.

'The unpredictable nature of my eczema made forging a successful career really difficult at times,' says Fuller. 'Taking time off work can be awkward enough but finding an understanding employer wasn't always easy. There was also the stress of wanting to keep my condition secret so I didn't stand out as troublesome, having to explain eczema to new colleagues, and timing my medication so it didn't make me drowsy during busy periods.'

Cox adds: 'It's vital that employers are aware of these challenges faced by their staff, so they can ensure best practice in the workplace for eczema sufferers.'

*The detrimental impact of eczema in the workplace is the focus of this year's National Eczema Week (September 11-18). To find out more, contact the NES on 0800 089 1122 or at [www.eczema.org](http://www.eczema.org)*

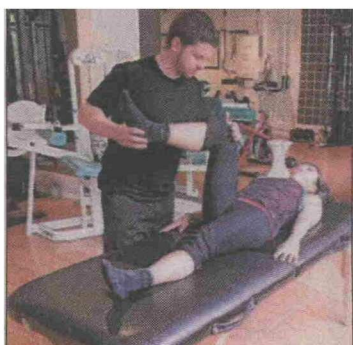


## › Treatment corner

**The treatment:** Muscle Activation Technique (MAT) is a unique manual therapy that focuses on helping people achieve more active, pain-free lifestyles by identifying and correcting muscular imbalances. It sees muscle tightness as the body's way of protecting itself from unstable joints. When a muscle is weak, other muscles tighten up in order to help stabilise the joints, which can cause injury or pain. MAT gets the weak muscle working again, helping to restore normal body alignment. It can help people recover from injury-related surgery and conditions like arthritis, and improve sports performance.

**Why we like it:** After suffering from a slipped disc, I was willing to try anything to relieve the excruciating

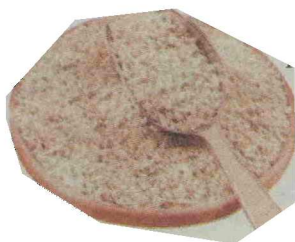
sciatic nerve pain. My treatment with MAT expert Michael Goulden at the Integra fitness studios (pictured) in east London began with a thorough discussion about the nature of my injury and explanation of the theory



behind MAT. He then assessed the range of motion in my legs, feet and hip flexors. I was amazed to find that it was my right side, not the injured left side, that was the most restricted. My next session would involve exercises designed to 'wake up' those weaker muscles.

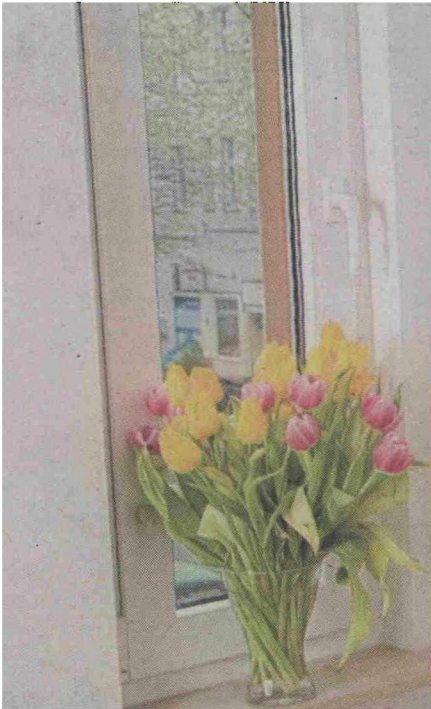
**Why we don't:** MAT is not a quick fix. Rather than solely treating symptoms, which more conventional techniques aim to do, it seeks out the starting point of physical problems, so takes longer to work. Also, practitioners aren't easy to find, as there are only a handful in Britain.

*For more information call 020 7193 0862 or email [info@integra-training.net](mailto:info@integra-training.net)*





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**Triggers: Eczema can be caused by cleaning products and dust mites at home and by chemical irritants at work.**

Picture: Alamy