

For years, I wore gloves to hide my eczema. Then a new drug healed me in FOUR weeks

By LAURA TOPHAM

HARD-WORKING businessman Dominic Rawlins had looked forward to his retirement for years. When he finally sold his company and bought a huge house in France to renovate, his dreams looked set to be realised.

Little did he imagine that the tiny blisters that had started to appear on his hands would soon put paid to his plans. For this rash was in fact the start of chronic hand eczema.

Within three years Dominic's hands became so sore he was unable to complete everyday tasks, let alone work on the house he'd bought — it had to be sold.

'If someone had told me years ago they had hand eczema, I'd have thought nothing of it as I didn't realise how bad it could be,' says Dominic, 65,

from Manchester. 'But you become unable to do anything — I wasn't even able to play with my grandson when he was born.'

Eczema is a dry skin condition characterised by scaly, red, itchy patches. Around six million Britons are affected, with hand eczema the most common form because that skin is most exposed.

'Around 10 per cent of the population suffers from hand eczema, but many people often think it's an infection or inflammation,' says Mabs Chowdhury, a dermatologist at University Hospital of Wales in Cardiff.

Like a lot of patients, Dominic waited years for a correct diagnosis.

'I first noticed the rash eight years ago,' he says. 'At first, it was just small patches of tiny blisters on my fingers, so I ignored it, hoping it would clear up on its own. But by the time I retired in 2004 the rash had spread and started itching, so I went to see my GP.'

'The doctor said it was athlete's foot — the blisters were on my feet, too — so we tried creams for that, but the condi-



tion only got worse. The itchin-ness was indescribable — it was impossible not to scratch.

‘When the blisters burst they left dead, broken skin and I often developed infections, which then needed to be treated with antibiotics.’

DURING a holiday with his wife Janice in Rome in 2006, Dominic vowed to get expert help.

‘My hands were so bad — really painful,’ he says. ‘It looked horrible and I was very self-conscious. I wore white cotton gloves in restaurants and pulled back if anyone went to shake hands.’

‘I couldn’t bear it any longer and asked for a referral to a dermatologist on my return.’

His GP made an urgent referral and Dominic was seen three weeks later on the NHS. The dermatologist diagnosed eczema, and then tested to see what might have triggered it.

Dominic was diagnosed with atopic eczema, the other most common form. This is thought to have a genetic link and can flare up at any time — it’s

caused by the immune system over-acting.

The immune system releases histamine that causes itchin-ness; the inflammatory cells in the skin become overactive, causing swelling and redness.

There is no cure, but to tackle the inflammation Dominic was prescribed steroid creams, including Dermovate and Betnovate, as well as moisturising creams to soften the skin, but nothing seemed to help.

By then, the long-term problem was having an increas-ing impact on Dominic’s life.

‘I’d bought a beautiful 14-bedroom house on the Brittany coast to do up. But the condition kept interrupting my work. I couldn’t even do simple things such as putting in screws.’

‘Eventually, I accepted the eczema wasn’t improving, so I sold the house.’

His is not an unusual experi-ence, says Margaret Cox, chair-man of the National Eczema Society. ‘Hand eczema has a huge impact because from the moment you get up you are using your hands. Just brushing your teeth and getting dressed will be a challenge,’ she says.

In 2007, Dominic’s dermatolo-

gist tried a new line of treat-ment: steroid tablets, which suppress the immune system and inhibit inflammation.

Unfortunately for Dominic, the steroids had serious side-effects. ‘I put on weight and had a brief spell of depression — something I’ve never experi-enced before,’ he says.

‘The steroids also suppressed my immune system, so I

suffered endless infections in my hands — it just made the problem worse.’ Then, just over 12 months ago, his dermatolo-gist said a new drug, alitretin-oin — brand name **Toctino** — was available on the NHS.

It blocks the inflammatory response in the skin and is the first product licensed for chronic hand eczema, says Mr Chowdhury. ‘So far I’ve treated half a dozen people and within four to eight weeks they showed remarkable results.’

Dominic says the benefits have been dramatic. ‘I noticed a massive difference within just a fortnight,’ he says. ‘The blistering stopped and my skin started healing.’

‘After four weeks the condi-tion was completely cleared and I stopped the tablets.’

‘I was over the moon — for the first time in six years I am back to normal and can do all the things I want to do.’

‘I think the drug is absolutely marvellous. You are left with a lot of dry skin, so I use emollients, but my hands and feet are virtually perfect.’

Now dermatologists and support charities are trying to spread the message to millions affected by hand eczema.

‘People need to be encour-aged not to give up,’ says Margaret Cox. ‘Hand eczema won’t get better on its own, but there are treatments out there that can help.’

Meanwhile, Dominic is enjoying playing with his grandson and last week started redecorating his home.



Pain-free: Dominic Rawlins

Source: Daily Mail {Main}
Edition:
Country: UK
Date: Tuesday 14, December 2010
Page: 51
Area: 588 sq. cm
Circulation: ABC 2129328 Daily
BRAD info: page rate £32,508.00, scc rate £129.00
Phone: 020 7938 6000
Keyword: Toctino

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