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Understanding the toll of eczema

It may be common, but eczema can still have a major impact on the lives of sufferers – especially when it develops on the hands. **Katie Baldwin** reports.

FOR Leanne Swales, her hands are the tools of her trade. As a beauty therapist, they are constantly on show to clients.

Her job also means she needs to wash them frequently and handle potential irritants like nail varnish remover.

But these vital parts of her job can make her eczema much worse.

The 27-year-old has suffered from the skin condition for much of her life, though it disappeared for a time in her teens.

Since having her little girl Freya, now three, her eczema has grown worse.

And one of the most visible places that she suffers is on her hands.

That leaves her dealing emotional as well as physical effects.

“As a beauty therapist I get really self-conscious if I have a flare up and I’m doing a manicure for someone,” she said.

Eczema affects one in five children and one in 12 adults in the UK.

For Leanne, from Bramley, Leeds, it’s a condition she’s had since

childhood. She grew out of it, but then it flared up again in her late teens and early 20s.

When she was pregnant with Freya, she found her eczema became much worse – she suspects there is a hormonal link.

The condition leaves her hands red raw and scaly and they can bleed and

crack, while she also gets patches in the creases of her arms and under her eyes.

“I start scratching in my sleep and sometimes it wakes me up. When it’s bad, it’s very sore and it looks horrible,” she said.

“I am constantly washing my hands because of the work I do and sometimes it gets so bad I have to use latex gloves.

“When you are washing your hands, it can sting and become quite uncomfortable.”

As well as managing the condition at work, it can also affect what she can do with her daughter.

“It’s stopped me doing some things with Freya, like swimming when I have a bad bout of it,” Leanne said.

“And simple things like washing her hair and getting shampoo in the cracks is

very painful.”

Luckily Leanne’s clients are very understanding – though she can feel self-conscious while at work.

“I lot of my clients do understand and they don’t bat an eyelid,” she said.

“But I would like to get rid of it.”

The cause of the most common type of eczema is thought to be a combination of environmental and genetic factors.

Leanne has a family history of eczema, while her daughter also has the condition.

The beauty therapist has tried various treatments but is now hoping a referral to a dermatologist will provide expert advice.

Stress can be a trigger and she’s

hoping she doesn’t have a bout in the run-up to her wedding to partner Marc Broadbent this September.

The fact that many sufferers, like Leanne, feel self-conscious can add to stress and therefore to the worsening of the condition.

A new study has revealed that skin conditions like eczema can have a major psychological impact.

More than 80 per cent of people with hand eczema said they were embarrassed or ashamed of their condition and more than three-quarters said it negatively affected their mood.

The research, by the website www.myhandeczema.co.uk,

also discovered eight out of 10 people were less likely to want to touch someone because of the eczema on their own hands.

The research was done in conjunction with psychologist Dr Linda Papadopoulos, who is also an expert in the field of psychodermatology.

Speaking to the YEP, she said that in today’s society, how we look is paramount to who we are.

“After the face, the hands are very significant in how we connect to people.

“It’s the part of our bodies which are most visible.”

She said that because skin conditions were on show, strangers felt able to comment on them in a



way they wouldn't about other health issues.

"It's amazing the sense of entitlement that people have," she said.

Dr Linda said she often came across patients whose skin conditions were having a massive impact on their lives, and her own cousin had experienced an insensitive remark about her skin problem.

"That hurt her so much, and understandably so," the psychologist said.

"There is a lot of mythology and misunderstanding when it comes to skin disorders. "Contagion, lack of hygiene and things like skin manipulation and scratching are often seen as the cause of skin conditions, affecting how people behave towards those with skin disease."

Hands can have a big impact on self-esteem, she added, explaining that the skin and psyche are closely linked – which is why stress is a major trigger factor.

"Hand eczema can be a debilitating condition that has the potential to impact the way people feel about themselves and even their social interactions – whether that's caring for a family member, socialising, playing a certain sport, going on holiday or even working," she added.

"So many people put their lives on hold. That's one of the worst things about skin conditions."

She praised Leanne for speaking out about the issue and how it affected her, while Dr Linda's advice for patients is to ensure they get medical help.

To deal with worries about what others will think, she advises having a brief explanation ready that will deflect questions.

"Sometimes it's having that one-liner that you can use to explain it away," Dr Linda said.

"If you suffer from hand eczema take control of it – you have no reason to feel shame or embarrassment."

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Eczema factfile

- Eczema causes the skin to become red, dry, itchy and sore. In severe cases the skin may bleed, weep or become crusty.
- It affects people of all ages but is primarily seen in children – though adults who 'grow out' of it may see it return later in life.
- There are several different types of eczema. The most common is atopic, meaning a family tendency to develop eczema, asthma and hayfever.
- Atopic eczema usually develops when a child is under five and affects up to 15 per cent of children in the UK by the age of seven.
- The exact cause is unknown but is thought to include genetic and environmental factors.
- The condition often comes in bouts with periods of flare-ups.
- Treatment normally includes an emollient cream or ointment to moisturise the skin and possibly a corticosteroid to apply to skin to reduce inflammation.



