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High cost of painful condition

NATIONAL Eczema week begins today
HANNAH DAVIES
finds out how its effects can leave a sufferer feeling isolated and excluded.

PAM Patterson is an outgoing, talkative woman with a warm and easy manner. She's got the confidence which comes from a life time working with other people in her business development job.

But Pam, a mother-of-two from Ushaw Moor, Durham, has had to bounce back after becoming one of six million sufferers in the country who have hand eczema.

Pam's life has been blighted by her eczema for four years and some simple, everyday tasks are impossible.

She explains: "I was familiar with eczema because my youngest daughter, Heather, had it from about three months old.

"We'd learnt to manage her condition quite well but then I developed allergic eczema from black hair dye PPD.

"It is the same thing a lot of hairdressers get allergic to, but it is a commonly used dye in everything from newsprint to tattoos and it can be transferred from anybody who has it on their hands.

"I wasn't prepared for quite how severe it would be."

Hand eczema is a common skin condition, causing symptoms including red blisters beneath the skin, itching, swelling, scaling and deep cracks that can become infected. When severe, hand eczema can be a painful and debilitating

condition that can have a seriously detrimental impact on a person's quality of life - greater at times than life-threatening illnesses such as cancer.

Around 80% of severe hand eczema sufferers say it has a large impact on their social life and in some cases people may be forced to give up their job as they are no longer able to work.

Pam, mum to Heather, 11, and Holly, 19, and married to John, 49, a sales manager, shows her hands to me. They are red-raw and covered in cracks. And, she adds, "they get worse than this.

"My hands are actually much better than they have been because I've been wearing white silk gloves which really help."

Pam went through years of agony before finding treatments which actually worked for her.

She states: "Anyone who develops the eczema needs to know you need to go and see your GP and ask to be referred to a consultant.

"I went to my GP and was just given some cream and told to get on with it.

"In three years of having it there was no follow-up, so I ended up asking to go and see a consultant myself."

The pain of hand eczema is a huge factor in her life. Pam explains:

"Having hand eczema is like the worst mosquito bite you've ever had, but constant.

My hands are always full of cuts, breaks in the skin. I have to wash them to keep out infections, but just washing them is incredibly painful.

Pam adds she is often self-conscious of shaking hands with people because her hands are cracked.

But often, she says, the pain of shaking hands is just too much to take.

She explains: "My job involves meeting a lot of people, so handshaking is pretty much the norm. But I have to try and do anything I can to avoid it.

"With all of the cracks and wounds on my hand it is very painful to get it into the right position and then there's the pressure.

"Not to mention the risk of infection. Everybody comes into contact with dirt on their hands every day and you don't really think about it. But my hands often have open sores and so they have a big tendency to get infected."

Pam's awareness of the issue has led her to reach out to other sufferers.

She recalls: "I was up in Scotland when I saw this young man in an outdoor sports shop. He had his fingers curled into his hands to protect them and to stop other



people looking at them.

“I showed him my gloved hands so he knew I was a fellow sufferer. He’s an inspirational person, who is in the mountain rescue, putting up with the pain to help others – yet

incredibly self-conscious about his own condition.”

Pam’s experiences echo those found in a new study by Professor Geoff Beattie, a psychologist at Manchester University.

He says British people need to touch each other virtually once a minute and nearly two thirds, 57%, saying they feel deprived and neglected when ‘touch starved’ for longer than a day.

Yet one in 10 people suffering from hand eczema are fearful of making human contact because they are embarrassed and ashamed of the dry, cracked skin on their hands, with 84% saying they lack confidence and have severe self esteem issues.

Prof Beattie’s The Power of Touch study was commissioned by www.myhandeczema.co.uk.

He adds: “Hand eczema sufferers really are losing touch with society as they are fearful of making contact with their hands.

“The power of touch brings huge emotional and psychological benefits and can release ‘feel good’ hormones.

“If you are touched by someone – even a stranger – it makes you more receptive towards them. Being unable to touch others can lead to people feeling anxious and even depressed.”



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HAND ECZEMA – THE HANDS-ON FACTS

1. More than six million people in the UK – one in ten – suffer from hand eczema. It is a painful and debilitating condition, causing red blisters beneath the surface of the skin, swelling, scaling, deep cracks and thickening of the outer layer of skin.

2. Hand eczema can be so extreme for sufferers, they resort to desperate measures to try and gain relief from the pain, such as pouring glue into the cracks of their skin. Some bathe their hands in ice cold water five times a day, while others put their hands into the freezer in an

attempt to stop the pain.

3. Hand eczema stops people from leading a normal, everyday life. Simple tasks such as cooking, bathing a child, using a computer keyboard, handling money or even shaking hands with someone may be impossible because of painful cracks in the skin which can become infected. It is a cause of huge economic loss to both individuals and their employers and is one of the most common occupational skin diseases.

4. The earlier people get help,

the less risk there is of hand eczema becoming long-term and chronic. Some treatments are only available from a dermatologist or skin specialist, yet sufferers may endure years of ineffective treatments before finally being referred to a specialist. If treatments are not working, it is vital that people return to their GP and ask to be referred to a dermatologist.

5. Sufferers can get more information about the causes, management and treatment of hand eczema, by visiting www.myhandeczema.co.uk



SUFFERING Pam Patterson

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PAINFUL Pam Patterson from Ushaw Moor, who suffers from Eczema on her hands.