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# Ellen looks to give a helping hand

## Teenager wants to raise awareness about eczema

Imagine being so desperate to heal the deep, open wounds on your fingers, you resort to filling them with superglue. Imagine being too afraid to shake an outstretched hand. In Eczema Awareness Week, a teenager talks about the trials of living with hand eczema...

THE 17-year-old girl sipping cola in a corner of the bar looks no different to you or I.

But she has seen people recoil in horror from her so many times, she knows how it feels to be an outcast.

"Sometimes, I feel like a leper," she says quietly.

Eczema has been the bane of Ellen Higginbottom's life since she was born.

Today is a good day; the hand she stretches out in greeting seems mildly chapped, no more.

But when her condition is at its worst, the skin on her hands drives her to a frenzy of scratching. With

each scratch, it thickens and roughens, then splits into scores of open, bleeding wounds that refuse to heal.

Some eczema sufferers endure such pain and frustration, they superglue the cuts and cracks in their hands together or immerse their hands in the deep-freeze to numb the pain and the intense, maddening itching for a few moments.

"When my hands are bad, I can't bring myself to shake hands with anyone because I can't bear to see the horror in their faces as they touch my skin," she says. "They think they are going to catch something from me, which is just not true - eczema isn't infectious.

"People don't realise how important touch is and what it feels like to be denied it."

As a child, eczema affected her face and body and her mum would beg her not to scratch.

"It makes it worse; you

scratch off layers of skin cells and your body goes into overdrive to produce lots more. But the need to scratch is such an overpowering urge," says Ellen. "Mum used to cut my fingernails almost to the quick and I'd still manage to scratch. At night in my sleep, I'd rub my hands raw on the edge of the headboard."

She explains eczema strikes in seven-year cycles. From birth to seven was a bad period; the next seven years were less troublesome. After 14, it flared up with a vengeance and she had to face embarrassing questions and

stares at Westfield School. There were times when she could barely write because holding a pen was so painful.

She remembers the soreness and humiliation: "The cuts and cracks in my hands would bleed for days. I'd have blood on my pillow, blood on the cuffs of my school shirt and people were forever asking me how I had cut myself.

"At mealtimes I felt so embarrassed that people were having to look at my raw,



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weeping flesh.”

This is not easy for Ellen to talk about. It has taken an hour of coaxing and questioning to get beyond the bubbly exterior and persuade her to reveal the rawness.

She isn't doing it because she wants sympathy; rather, she wants understanding for the six million people in the UK who are fellow sufferers.

“I know when people see the state of my hands they don't mean to hurt my feelings; they react that way because they don't know what it is. But the look of disgust on their faces really upsets me. That's not going to change unless people like me talk about it.”

Winter weather and stress causes flare-ups and the trio of steroids Ellen takes in rotation - she becomes immune to them otherwise - relieve symptoms but offer no cure.

But the Beighton teenager refuses to let it take over her life. When an interview as a customer service advisor for a computer company beckoned, she lathered her hands in cream and slept with gloves on to ensure she was able to shake hands at her interview. She got the job.

■ **RESCUE pony Henry is Ellen's kindred spirit. He lifts her mood when she is low.**

“I think he understands when I'm having a bad day. There's a real bond between us because we have both felt like life's rejects at times,” says

Ellen.

**But Ellen has been urged to give Henry up and quit the sport of show-jumping she adores.**

Ellen explains. “My doctor has warned me that I should give up riding or run the risk of serious infections. I know he's right; there are often open sores on my hands. But I will not give up on Henry.”

She rescued the Welsh-cross cob from Thornberry Animal Sanctuary

three years ago, having fallen in love with the 14-hand bright bay at first sight.

But would love be enough? Henry had a reputation. Ten owners in as many years had failed to rein him in. And for the first few months, it looked like it was going to be the same story for Ellen.

“Henry had behaviour issues - it was all caused by his lack of trust in humans,” says Ellen.

“Horses remember everything that has happened to them. At some time in his life he had been badly treated. He had been found a succession of new homes but because of his attitude people kept handing him back.

“I just couldn't do that to him again and I was determined to persuade him to trust me. A lot of people have shied away from me in my life, too. It takes me a long time to figure people out, to make sure they are not going to judge me for my condition. I thought that must be how Henry felt.

“Any pain I go through is worth it to keep Henry.”

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People think they are going to catch something - but they can't

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## THE POWER OF TOUCH

■ MORE than six million people could be losing touch with society because of hand eczema.

A new study by renowned Sheffield body language psychologist Geoff Beattie, pictured right, reveals Britain is now a more touching nation than it was four decades ago, with people needing to touch each other virtually once a minute.

Professor Beattie's 'The Power of Touch' study was commissioned by [www.myhandeczema.co.uk](http://www.myhandeczema.co.uk) to understand the importance of touch in society and the impact hand eczema has on sufferers' ability to physically interact with others.



Says Professor Beattie, who lives near Ladybower and made his name as the Big Brother psychologist: "Touch is so important to our wellbeing. It brings huge emotional and psychological benefits and can release 'feel good' hormones. Yet millions of hand eczema sufferers fear it. Being unable to touch others can lead to people feeling anxious and even depressed."

## HANDS-ON FACTS ABOUT HAND EC

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

It can be so extreme sufferers resort to desperate measures, 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.

The condition can have a seriously detrimental impact on quality of life . Over 80 per cent say their condition

crushes confidence and self-esteem.

Simple tasks such as cooking, bathing a child, using a computer keyboard, handling money or even shaking hands may be impossible.

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 being referred. Sufferers who cannot get their condition under control are being urged to ask their GP for a referral.

For more help, go to [www.my-handeczema.co.uk](http://www.my-handeczema.co.uk)

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**Spreading the word:** Teenager Ellen Higginbottom.

Picture: Steve Parkin