

Finally I love

Eczema was destroying Melissa Nadarajan's life until she found a very unconventional cure. Here, she shares her story with HANNAH BARR

FOR almost two decades Melissa Nadarajan's life has been blighted by the skin condition eczema.

For most people this involves small itchy patches across certain parts of the skin but Melissa suffered so badly that two years ago she refused to leave the house and was diagnosed with depression.

Melissa, 19, was covered from head to toe in dry, flaky patches. She was in so much pain that she screamed with frustration. The condition, she says, had profoundly affected her both physically and psychologically.

"I'd had eczema since I was a baby and it had got gradually worse," says Melissa, who lives in London with her parents. "I was in so much pain and felt so ashamed about the way I looked that I refused to leave the house for three months."

"My self-esteem was at rock bottom and I avoided school because I didn't want the

other children to laugh at me. My whole body was covered in red, scaly patches. When I tried to climb the stairs the skin on my legs would crack and bleed. It drove me to tears."

Eczema is a fairly common inflammation of the upper layers of the skin. It is seen primarily in children and affects around one in 12 adults. There is no known cure but there is a genetic, or inherited, tendency to develop the condition.

Treatment usually involves topical moisturisers and steroid creams, which aim to control the symptoms by reducing inflammation and relieving the intense itching.

Over the years Melissa has tried every over-the-counter product available as well as prescription creams but none had any effect. "The doctor kept saying I'd grow out of it but as time passed it just

became worse," says Melissa, who is studying graphic design. "By the time I was a teenager I'd lived with the condition for so long I would scratch my skin purely out of habit. And it was often so itchy and painful that sometimes I wouldn't be able to sleep. I had to keep my fingernails short to limit the damage."

"When I was 15 my GP prescribed sleeping tablets and to protect my skin I had to wear cotton gloves in bed."

"By the time I was 17 my cracked, inflamed and weeping skin was so painful that everyday tasks such as walking were extremely uncomfortable. For a few weeks I felt so low and the pain was so bad that I didn't bother to get out of bed."

Along with this extreme discomfort and reduced mobility Melissa also felt self-conscious. "Eczema

made me feel socially excluded," she recalls. "I was terrified of social situations. I'd worry that people were staring at me in disgust."

"I've even experienced cashiers leaving my change on the counter instead of handing it to me because they don't want to touch my hands. It's as if they're worried it's catching. When people treated me like a leper I always felt desperately ashamed."

MELISSA found it hard to behave like a normal teenager. "Boys wouldn't even look at me and it affected my friendships. I could never do things like go to sleepovers because being in contact with animals and different washing powders on sheets often made my eczema flare up."

"I just wanted to hide from the world. In the end the thought of leaving the house was so traumatic that I stopped going out at all." During those three months Melissa's teachers sent her

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schoolwork home. "Not having any human contact other than my family was hard but I wouldn't give in. I couldn't bear to go out in the state I was in."

Her despair became so great she was diagnosed with clinical depression in August, 2006. She was referred for counselling by her GP but two months of sessions did little to help.

In April this year Melissa contacted the National Eczema Society which recommended hypnotherapy as a possible solution and put her in contact with therapist Monica Black.

"Though I couldn't see how hypnotherapy could help a physical skin condition I was so desperate I think I would have tried anything."

The following month she underwent six sessions of hypnotherapy. She was put into a deep state of relaxation while Monica taught her how to control the pain and stop scratching her skin. She was also taught how to release and manage the stress that the eczema caused her – the theory being that alleviating stress would allow Melissa's skin and immune system to recover and improve.

"It might sound like an unconventional treatment but hypnotherapy is very effective in relieving the symptoms of eczema, as it is often linked to a psychological state of mind," explains Monica.

"People with skin disorders often have a negative body image so they get themselves into a vicious circle where their stress and negative emotions can drive their skin condition."

"In an altered state of consciousness the body is relaxed and open to suggestions, such as ways to stop scratching and boosting confidence. This can often be more effective than creams. It's a relatively new way of treating eczema but it's proving really successful."

IN MELISSA'S case there is little doubt the treatment has worked. Four months on and, for the first time in her life, her skin is clear of eczema. She started a college course this September and feels part of normal student life.

"Monica taught me relaxation techniques I can do at home, including deep breathing to help switch off my thoughts," Melissa explains. "She taught me how to stop scratching by visualising my hand in an ice bucket so that it feels numb and stops itching. By learning to relax I've regained control of my life and health. Subsequently, my skin was given the opportunity it needed to heal and improve without being constantly attacked."

After just four weeks of hypnotherapy Melissa felt like a different person. "For the first time in years I feel confident enough to walk around in a T-shirt with my arms exposed – something I wouldn't have contemplated before."

"Before the hypnotherapy I'd have classed myself as an introvert. I was so shy, always

worried about people's reactions to my eczema. Now I don't care what people think. And though my eczema is never going to disappear completely I know now that it doesn't have to dictate who I am."

Buoyed by her confidence, Melissa started a diet and lost a stone. "I feel really positive about myself," she adds. "I even have a boyfriend whom I've been seeing for two months."

"For a long time I thought I'd never be free of eczema but now I finally have a new lease of life and I'm determined to make the most of it."

● For more information about Monica Black visit www.hampsteadhypnotherapy.com or call 0207 419 2211.

OTHER ALTERNATIVE TREATMENTS TO EASE THE ITCH OF ECZEMA

● Drinking buffalo milk has been reported to help alleviate the symptoms of eczema and psoriasis.

● Clothing impregnated with tiny particles of silver is thought to remove the urge to scratch. The theory is endorsed by Margaret Cox, of the National Eczema Society. "I certainly buy into the idea of silver-impregnated materials because it is accepted that silver has anti-bacterial properties and it is being widely used in a range of medical applications by doctors," she says.

● Themba (from the African word "hope") is a topical

cream based on the fruit of the kigelia tree, which has been used for centuries in Africa because of its healing properties. Available from The Little Herbal Company (01484 689807/ www.littleherbal.co.uk), where a 30ml pot costs £11.95.

● Bathing in porridge oats can help relieve eczema. Wrap a handful in a square of muslin or an old pair of tights, then place it under the hot tap of your bath.

● National Eczema Society runs a helpline from 8am to 8pm, Monday to Friday: 0870 241 3604. See www.eczema.org

CONFIDENT: Hypnotherapy has given Melissa Nadarajan a new life after years of pain and hiding herself away because of eczema



Picture: DANIEL LUNCH