

Stress can aggravate psoriasis

Fret not if you have psoriasis. **Aneeta Sundararaj** speaks to consultant dermatologist Dr Steven Chow on how to handle the condition

WHAT do Kim Kardashian, LeAnn Rimes and Joseph Stalin have in common? All have, at one time or other, suffered from a skin condition known as psoriasis.

"Psoriasis appears as raised red patches of skin covered with silvery-white scales," says Dr Steven Chow, consultant dermatologist and medical advisor to the Psoriasis Association of Malaysia.

The condition, which affects one in 50 Malaysians, occurs when the body's immune system sends out faulty signals that speed up the regeneration of skin cells. A hereditary condition, it first manifests when lesions appear on the arms, elbows and legs.

"One of the worst things about psoriasis is that people don't understand that they are not going to get the condition if they touch someone with it," says Dr Chow, dispelling the myth that psoriasis is contagious. He hopes that with recognition of World Psoriasis Day, which fell on Oct 29, people will become more aware of the condition and how to deal with it.

"When treating psoriasis, I try to help the patient go through it with his or her pride intact. This is because psoriasis influences how others treat the patient, socially, emotionally and even sexually. All these will affect how the patient feels about himself or herself."

The first time Dr Chow meets the patient is very important. "I will do a thorough study of all that has happened in the patient's life," he says. This allows him to identify what triggers the condition.

In most cases, the lesions start to appear when a person is between the ages of 15 and 35. "Sometimes, the condition flares up because of injury to the skin or an adverse reaction to certain medication. Sometimes, it's simply a case of being overstressed. I've seen people who take time off work to relax and their condition improves. The moment they go back to work, it starts again."

One thing that frustrates Dr Chow most is the misinformation patients receive about the condition.

"Everyone knows a cure for it, except doctors. I knew of a man who had gone to every charlatan in town. His body was so abused by what they

were giving him that he ended up in the ICU. He later died."

Although the condition is incurable, treatment helps minimise its effects and how often the patient suffers a relapse. "A difficult area to treat is psoriasis of the scalp," says Dr Chow.

"Many patients delay seeking treatment because they think it's dandruff. Previously, treatment used to be messy and smelly. Now, there are new creams, ointments and gels in the market which are odourless and which makes it easier for me to treat psoriasis of the scalp."

Dr Chow says the hardest patients to treat are those who have given up hope. "People harp on the incurability of the condition. They hope for a miracle but don't want to think about changing their lifestyle. They actually think they have no stress."

His advice to sufferers is simple: "Control your psoriasis, don't let psoriasis control you."

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Dr Steven Chow

Getting over the social stigma

EUGENE Cross, 69, is president of the Psoriasis Association Of Malaysia, a non-profit organisation which aims to provide information and support to those suffering from the condition.

Cross been suffering from psoriasis for the past 45 years.

"At first, I thought it was dandruff. When I went to the UK, a dermatologist told me, 'My son, this is psoriasis. You'll carry it to your grave,'" says the retired engineer with the Malaysian Air Force.

"At that time, treatment was horrible. It was cold tar which was smelly and brownish. I was also in pain whenever there was a relapse. One time, I was on medical leave for a whole year. I couldn't turn or stretch my body because the skin would crack and bleed.

"At work, I was assigned to a desk job because I couldn't do on-site investigations. In the end, I wasn't promoted and retired with the rank of Major."

Determined to look on the bright side of things, Cross talks about the devotion his family showed him. "Thank God for my wife. Do you know, there was a time when she would sweep the house and collect one bowl of dead skin every day?"

Others, however, have not been as understanding: A cashier in a supermarket once refused to hand him his change. Instead, she put the money on the counter. Of all the stories he tells, the saddest is of a 17-year-old girl who committed suicide because she was unable to handle the stigma.

Cross notes that stress is a common factor amongst psoriasis sufferers. "There's usually terrible stress when the lesions first erupt. Mine started when I was a cadet officer and the ragging was so bad. Others have similar stories. Either they have lost a family member, had final exams or a breakdown in their love life. Some foods also trigger my condition."

Among the foods he cannot eat are brinjal, yam, peanuts and durian.

Signs and symptoms of psoriasis

1. The characteristic lesions are where the skin appears to have a red base with silvery scales forming on top.
2. The skin surrounding the affected area is normal.
3. There are changes in the nails.
4. Sometimes, the affected area is itchy.
5. Patients also suffer from joint pain.

Psoriasis Association of Malaysia

1 Jalan 14/2C, Taman Serdang Utama 43300 Seri Kembangan, Selangor
 Tel: 03-8948 4335
 Fax: 03- 8948 1537
 Email: psoriasismalaysia.org@gmail.com (psoriasismalaysia.wordpress.com/)



Even celebrities such as Kim Kardashian suffer from psoriasis