

medication is not the cause. There are a number of treatments such as artificial saliva, chewing gum and mouthwashes however these are not always effective. If the eyes are a problem try Liquifilm® for mild symptoms use every 30 minutes initially then reduce usage until eyes feel comfortable. For severely dry eyes use viscotears or gel tears which can be used three times a day.

Social and Psychological Aspects of Scleroderma

No less important are the social and psychological aspects of the disease. This involves many of the health care team that are looking after you.

There are often lots of things that can be done to help people cope at home despite their disabilities. A range of products that you may not know about might help you do the things you can't manage.

The "hidden problem" is often the emotional aspect of having a condition like scleroderma. It is

difficult to emphasise enough how important it is to treat this part of the disease.

Be Positive

It is known that emotional stress can impair the blood flow. There is a lot of support available from professionals (medication, counselling and other psychological support), and voluntary support (other patients to talk to). A positive look at the disease is half way to defeating it.

Open discussions can help family and friends understand the physical problems and feelings you have. Often this can help them to help you when you need it most.

The disease can change the way you look to some degree. It doesn't have to change who you are.



Scleroderma Not Just Hard Skin

You can get more information about Scleroderma from:

The Scleroderma Society
PO Box 581, Chichester, PO19 9EW Tel: 020 7000 1925

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www.sclerodermasociety.co.uk
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What is Scleroderma?

Scleroderma is one of the more uncommon of the connective tissue diseases. These diseases affect the connective tissue of the joints, tendons, muscles, skin, blood vessels, heart, lungs, and many other organs.

Scleroderma is sometimes called systemic sclerosis. Although it is a chronic illness, proper treatment and management can make it possible for sufferers to lead full and productive lives.

How many kinds of Scleroderma?

There are many types of scleroderma. Firstly one can differentiate between systemic and localised scleroderma (morphoea), which only affects the skin and not the internal organs.

With systemic sclerosis, distinction can be made between the limited and diffuse form based upon the extent of skin involvement. The division can be made on the pattern of involvement and antibodies. The internal organs, including the blood vessels, digestive system, lungs, heart, kidneys, muscles and joints may become involved.

Scleroderma varies from person to person. Somebody who has the systemic form of the illness may have one or more parts of the body affected to different degrees. Systemic sclerosis (Scleroderma) should not be confused with multiple sclerosis. There is no connection between the two diseases.

Who gets Scleroderma?

The disease affects four times more women than men. The illness usually starts between the ages of 25 to 50 but it can affect children and the elderly.

What Causes Scleroderma?

The cause of scleroderma is still unknown. It is not contagious, so you can't catch it from someone or give it to anybody else. It is not an inherited disease and therefore is not passed down from one generation to the next.

We also know that the tissue cells of people who have scleroderma produce too much of a protein called collagen. Collagen is the cement that holds the cells of the body together. Too little and we fall apart, too much and the body becomes stiff and unable to function properly.

The small blood vessels of the body are also damaged by scleroderma and the immune system is involved. The immune system is your body's natural defence against illness. Normally it acts as the defence system, fighting off germs. Unfortunately, it can sometimes be defective and attack the healthy body as is the case in scleroderma.

How does Scleroderma Start?

One of the early problems sufferers get is sensitivity to cold. This is called Raynaud's phenomenon and it affects most people with scleroderma at some point.

Raynaud's phenomenon occurs when the blood vessels overreact to cold, causing the fingers and toes to turn white, blue

and then go red when warmed up. This causes numbness and tingling, and sometimes even pain.

Swelling and puffiness of the hands and feet is also a common early feature of scleroderma. The affected fingers may look and feel swollen, making the skin lose its normal lines and look shiny.

How does Scleroderma Develop?

Most people with scleroderma have some thickening and hardening of the skin; especially of the hands, arms and face. The joints can tighten into a bent position due to tightening of the skin or tendons. Scleroderma can also cause joint inflammation with symptoms of pain, stiffness, swelling, warmth and tenderness. You may also get tired very quickly as the muscles may be weak.

Finger ulcers can also occur due to the narrowing of the blood vessels. Some people also develop small white calcium deposits in various parts of the body.

The illness may also affect the tissue of the internal organs. For example, if the digestive system is involved, the muscles in the gullet may become weak leading to difficulties in swallowing. Heartburn can also be a frequent problem. Sometimes the middle and lower bowel is affected and this affects bowel motion.

The lungs, heart and kidneys can also be affected in scleroderma. The majority of patients will have the limited disease which might not get any worse or progress. If however progression does occur it may happen very slowly, and may

even get better without treatment.

What can be done to help?

There is no wonder drug but there is a lot to help the situation including physical, social and psychological support.

The physical treatments include exercise, and medications (both conventional and alternative medicines). Special exercise programs have proved most useful in the treatment of scleroderma by keeping the skin flexible, maintaining better blood flow, and keeping the joints supple.

Medications are too numerous to mention here but include creams, tablets and occasionally infusions.

Take Sensible Preventive Action

It is sensible to keep skin health to prevent cracking, peeling, and ulcerating. This can be done by regular moisturising and a good blood supply. A good blood supply can be achieved by keeping warm. The head, hands and feet are often the worst affected areas and should be covered up when in the cold. Hats, thermal clothing, hand warmers, electrically heated gloves/socks, and stopping smoking all helps this.

Irritants such as detergents and certain perfumed toiletries can worsen the damage to the skin. And some unperfumed soaps, creams and bath oils can help keep the skin supple and moist. This requires a degree of experiment to find the products that suit you.

Some patients will experience dry eyes and dry mouth symptoms known as Sicca Syndrome. If the mouth is dry check that