

HIDRADENITIS SUPPURATIVA (HS) is a chronic inflammatory skin disease. Awareness of this disease is poor and patients are often given antibiotics as it is usually mistaken for acne or boils.

Patients are also reluctant to seek treatment as it usually appears on sensitive parts of the body, such as the groin, buttocks, breasts and armpits.

Universiti Putra Malaysia senior medical lecturer and dermatologist Dr Kartini Farah Rahim says HS starts as pimples, but eventually becomes larger abscesses. These abscesses are painful, and will rupture, leaking blood-stained pus onto clothing.

"The smelly discharge and stains will make sufferers think that it is related to their hygiene habits. They are embarrassed to seek treatment. Most people find them repulsive or disgusting."

AN EMOTIONAL IMPACT

Dr Kartini says HS, also known as acne inversa, affects about one per cent of the population, and is more common in women aged 20 to 29.

Excess weight, stress, hormone changes, heat and humidity can worsen symptoms. However, severity may lessen after menopause.

"The exact cause is not well-understood, but factors that influence the development of the disease include genetics and hormonal and mechanical factors. The main factor is the obstruction of hair follicle outlets."

Dr Kartini says the condition has significant emotional impact on patients and their families. "Patients tend to hide their condition with loose clothing. They will also refrain from joining any activity to hide the lesions which are painful when rubbed. Lesions on the buttocks may make it too painful to sit down, especially when they are large. Some patients develop many lumps at one time and the discharge will leak

THAT'S NOT A PIMPLE

The Hidradenitis Suppurativa support group aims to raise more awareness about the skin condition, writes **Kasmiah Mustapha**

though their clothes, onto their bedding and furniture.

"Patients are unable to do well in exams, hold on to jobs or maintain personal relationships. Some become overweight as they turn to food for comfort. This disease can be very destructive."

She says there is currently no cure for the disease. However, early treatment can lead to temporary or prolonged remission.

In its early stages, the disease is usually treated medically, while surgery may be done for longstanding and severe conditions, especially if only one or two areas are affected. Treatments include topical and oral antibiotics, hormone management and immunosuppressives. If necessary, steroid is injected into the lumps to reduce inflammation.

Dr Farah says early diagnosis is important to avoid permanent scars. Once it is under control, patients should be able to perform their daily activities without difficulties.

"Patients must avoid heat, humidity, sweating and friction on the affected area. They should avoid shaving, using perfume and deodorants to prevent skin irritation. They also must stop smoking and lose weight."



Hidradenitis Suppurativa is a chronic skin disease.



Hon has been suffering from HS since she was 17.

SUPPORT GROUP

Beatrice Hon Jia Qi has been suffering from the disease since she was 17. She has also undergone surgery to remove abscesses.

"No one could tell me what I was suffering from until I was referred to Hospital Serdang in 2013. It was then that I was told that I had hidradenitis suppurativa."

Hon, 27, says her condition is mild and does not affect her life drastically. But the difficult part is having to depend on her mother and housemates.

"I have to depend on someone for wound dressing and wound inspection. I also need to travel with gauze, plaster and saline. I have to restrict my activities whenever there is a flare-up, which also affects everyone around me."

Hon says the awareness of the disease is still lacking among the public and even medical practitioners. Some patients suffer in silence for many years before being diagnosed properly.

"Patients can join the HS support

group which was formed in March this year by the Dermatological Society of Malaysia. It is a platform for patients and carers to share their experiences, gain knowledge and raise awareness of HS so that it can be diagnosed early."

The group will hold its first HS Awareness Day on Aug 20 at Hospital Kuala Lumpur. For details, visit the Hidradenitis Suppurativa Support Group Malaysia facebook page or call 03-2615 5555 (ext 1564).

✉ kasmiah@nst.com.my

Dr Kartini says the condition has significant emotional impact on patients and their families.

