

HEALTH ALERT!

Patriotism Runs Deep, But Your Hands Shouldn't Show It



(NAPSA)—Cold hands that turn red, white and blue may be patriotic, but they can be an early symptom of an autoimmune disease called scleroderma. Many people, especially women, have consistently cold hands and feet and think nothing of it. But if you are one of them, you should.

According to the Scleroderma Foundation, scleroderma affects about 300,000 people in the United States, about 80 percent of whom are women in their child-bearing years. While scleroderma is Greek for “hard skin”—a symptom most commonly associated with the disease—it is a chronic, often progressive, autoimmune disease in which the body attacks itself, including internal organs, by overproducing collagen. The excess collagen makes the skin hard and prevents organs from functioning properly.

“Scleroderma is a serious disease that is best treated at an early stage, but misdiagnosis is common,” says Elaine Furst, R.N., Chair of the Scleroderma Foundation. “It can take three or more years for an individual to be correctly diagnosed and to begin receiving proper treatment.”

Misdiagnosis may occur in part because many symptoms are quite

common, but if you or someone you know has two or more of the following, talk to a doctor:

- Cold hands with “patriotic” changes
- Skin that is thick, shiny and/or tight
- Ulcerations, especially on fingers, that won't heal
- Frequent swelling or puffiness of hands and feet
- Joint pain
- Dry eyes and mouth

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There is no cure for scleroderma, but medications can treat its symptoms. And the earlier the symptoms are treated, the better chance you have of managing the disease and possibly even slowing its progression. New research demonstrates that people with scleroderma are living longer than ever because of the availability of new drugs that treat organ involvement.

For more information, contact the Scleroderma Foundation at 1-800-722-HOPE or visit www.scleroderma.org.