

wellbeing

Is your job making you sick?

About two million of us fall prey to work-related illnesses every year*. Here we meet three women who found effective solutions to the stress, strains and allergies that were severely affecting their daily working lives. Charlotte

Dovey reports

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Improve things. If I touched my face with my blistered hands, I'd wake the following day with a dry, itchy rash all over my face. By then I was 21 and had a young baby, but I was unable to do even the simplest tasks, such as sterilizing Hayley's bottles, without wearing gloves. My doctor then referred me to a dermatologist who prescribed me a course of anti-inflammatory steroids. I had intra-muscular injections every three months for a year but still it didn't clear it up.

Along with all the physical pain and itchiness, my skin condition really affected me emotionally. It looked so terrible that I spiralled into a deep depression. Thankfully, my relationship with John has always been strong or we could easily have drifted apart. In fact, it was he who suggested that I take time off work to look after Hayley and give my hands a chance to clear up. I'd been hardressing for over three years by then, but I finally gave in and became a full-time mother.

EXTREME MEASURES

Although I loved being with Hayley, the loss of salary wasn't easy and as my dermatitis didn't improve and never really healed, there seemed little benefit in staying at home. Eventually, after five years, I decided to return to work part-time. This time I was fastidious about protecting my skin. Barrier creams (I use SkinSure Plus, from £4.89 for 100ml, hygieneuk.com), which lock in the skin's moisture and keep out harmful irritants plus thin cotton gloves – which are rather like surgical gloves – became an essential part of my daytime uniform. And in the evening I'd use an oil-based moisturiser, like E45 cream, and bandage up my hands to help them heal overnight. They were extreme measures, but the only way I could continue to work.

I've been recently prescribed Synalar ointment, which has made a huge difference. The cream still contains steroids, but at a lower dose, and at long last my skin is much improved, though not completely cured.

Hardressing has had a massive impact on my health and years of using steroid creams has lowered my immune system. But two years ago I opened my salon and the satisfaction I get from having my own business makes all the suffering worthwhile. Although my condition still gets me down, I can't afford to just give it up and walk away, so I try to focus on my fantastic career, not on the dermatitis.*

Repetitive Strain Injury



Maria Hill, 45, works as an office manager. She is separated and lives in Cambridge and has two children, Joanne, 22, and Nicola, 19.

"From the day I left school at 18, I've been using a computer keyboard for around eight hours a day, five days a week in various deskbound roles, including being a secretary, data inputter and my current job as an office manager. For the past 15 years I've also had a computer at home, so evenings and weekends are often spent finishing off work or sending personal emails.

Three years ago, I started getting random twinges – and a dull ache – in my fingers and wrists while I was typing. But as the weeks progressed, the twinges became more frequent, to the point where I'd be in pain most days. I'd always been a fast typist – around 65 words per minute – but I slowed down to less than 40wpm as typing became so painful.

After two months, I found I also had less strength in my arms and hands. I'd go to pick up something heavy, like shopping bags, and found that I just couldn't manage the weight. I started taking Ibuprofen on a daily basis to mask the pain, but eventually it became unbearable. Soon after that, my arms were so weak I could barely pick up a cup of coffee.

On top of all this, the pain was affecting my ability to sleep at night and I felt more like 102 than 42. I had no choice but to take a few days off work, as I thought that a period of rest would sort it out. My employer was understanding about it, though I still felt guilty. I'm sure some of my colleagues thought I was just being a wimp. But it was so debilitating I could hardly muster the strength to pull on my socks, let alone spend all day typing. Any activity that required me to apply pressure with my hands – such as washing the windows or mopping the floor – became totally impossible.

DREADING THE DIAGNOSIS

In the back of my mind I was petrified that my GP would diagnose rheumatoid arthritis – a progressive auto-immune disease causing painful swelling in the joints. My mother developed the condition in her early forties and is now, at 68, wheelchair-bound because of it. However, after I'd explained my symptoms, as well as my working lifestyle, my GP diagnosed that I was suffering from Repetitive Strain Injury (RSI), a condition affecting around 500,000 people in the UK. It's usually brought about by the repeated flexing and extending of the muscles and tendons in the arms, hands and wrists while typing. As with most RSI sufferers, my 'lure' necessitated a total lifestyle change and my doctor gently convinced me that I would only regain the full use of my hands and arms, once I'd reduced the time I spent working on the computer – from 70 per cent of my working day to just 40 per cent.

He suggested regular 20-minute rest breaks from the computer every hour. During this time I could continue working but I'd use the phone rather than emailing people. My doctor also suggested taking a supplement called Lubramine (£999 for 30 capsules from Boots, three taken every morning until some relief was noted, then two capsules a day thereafter). Lubramine consists of a blend of natural fatty acids that lubricates your joints. Although expensive, it's been a complete lifesaver for me. On that dose, I felt a huge difference within just 10 days. After being barely able to pick up the TV remote control, I could easily carry a full bag of shopping.

I wouldn't wish RSI on anyone – it's a hugely debilitating condition. However, it has taught me an important lesson. Not only am I now far more time-efficient, but by simply making the effort to contact people by phone, instead of sending impersonal emails, my relationship with clients has also improved tenfold! ☺

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