

A Path to a Cure: Chronic Itch

The story of a patient, her chronic itch, and the Center for Chronic Pruritus in Münster.

Cortisone salves, a gluten-free diet, antihistamines, health spa visits, alternative medicines and treatments- since she was 18, Ute S. (real name redacted) had tried a slew of various therapies that all had one thing in common: none was able to offer long-term results in treating the plaguing itch localized on her arms and legs. Even following her 47th birthday, only guesses instead of an exact diagnosis regarding her condition could be made. The itchy nodules and papules that developed over the years on the affected areas could not be classified by any of the dermatologists and general practitioners she visited. But due to a visit to the Center for Chronic Pruritus (CCP) of the Münster University Hospital, the nearly 52 year old now lives almost symptom free. The KCP is run by dermatologist Prof. Dr. Sonja Ständer, one of the leading scientists in itch research worldwide. At first glance during her consultation in Münster, Ute S.'s doctor was able to diagnose prurigo nodularis, one of the most severe forms of chronic itch. What then followed was what Ute S. describes as a new beginning: one month after her first consultation, she chose to participate in an inpatient diagnostic and treatment program. Previous examinations had revealed that the cause of her chronic itching was atopic dermatitis. Reddish-brown nodules had formed on her skin due to long-term scratching.

In order to successfully treat prurigo nodularis, it is necessary to treat the underlying condition causing the itching. In addition to atopic dermatitis and other skin disorders, metabolic disorders such as diabetes, liver and kidney disease can also cause itching. Ute S.'s medicinal therapy was initially composed of a high dosage of immunosuppressants. "72 hours after starting them, the itch nearly disappeared", she recalled. In addition, the calming and healing of the skin was assisted by a regimen of basic medical care. Especially itchy nodules were injected with cortisone so as to break the vicious cycle of itching and scratching as quickly as possible. The results of this individually prepared therapy led to her current state of being virtually symptom free.

Ute S. first heard about the Competence Center in 2009 while reading a small newspaper article. Her long-term suffering, endless trek through multiple practices and clinics, constant insomnia, and high psychological strain due to work and deaths in the family left the mother of two and nurse at the brink. "Nothing helped; I simply endured it and tried to avoid making my life revolve around my disease. I am not sure how much longer I could have held out for," she said. Having a dedicated treatment team at the KCP that was capable of classifying her disease and creating an effective therapy plan meant the start of a life in which carrying out a daily routine was once again possible. By treating the underlying disease, the itching initially disappeared, thus allowing for the injured skin to heal and the nodules to gradually ebb. The more her health improved, the more her sleep, fatigue and inability to concentrate also improved. Her lust for life was returning. "The doctors in Münster had a plan from the very beginning that worked great," explained Ute S. To this day, the patient remains satisfied with the therapy. The immunosuppressant dosage could be reduced thanks to a therapy plan that was and is still viable for her. "Of course I knew stress made the symptoms worse, but I found the other doctor's advice to avoid it impossible," she recalled. The long-term strain caused by the disease was catalyst enough for mental distress and, combined with the difficulties of her daily life, such as her managing her career and family and caring for her sick mother, made her former situation almost impossible to manage. At the CCP,

extensive medical examinations were carried out as fast as possible in order to treat the underlying cause for her symptoms and provide relief.

Nowadays, Ute S. prefers to pace herself. By reducing her work hours and reorganizing her schedule, she has found even more relief. Frequent walks with her dog and spending time in her garden are other factors that contribute to her contentedness. "I have learned to take good care of myself," she shared. She no longer simply endures it when the itching returns, such as this past winter, but instead seeks the assistance of her general practitioner. During the winter, for example, the doctor determined that the cause was a vitamin D deficiency that was easily remedied, resulting in the itch once again disappearing. Ute S. knows that immunosuppressants can have serious side effects, but she doesn't feel left alone to deal with them. A positive and trusting relationship with her general practitioner and regular check-ups at the Competence Center in Münster, where blood counts and liver and kidney values are regularly examined, ensure her safety taking them. "I gladly accept the risks associated with the side effects in exchange for having my quality of life back," she stated.