

Cold urticaria

What would you do if you were allergic to the cold?

By Mona Fraser

It all started in the winter, 20 years ago: while outdoors, I got cold. All of a sudden, I felt itchy all over my body. My legs were burning, and then I discovered that I was full of hives. I was diagnosed with “cold urticaria.”

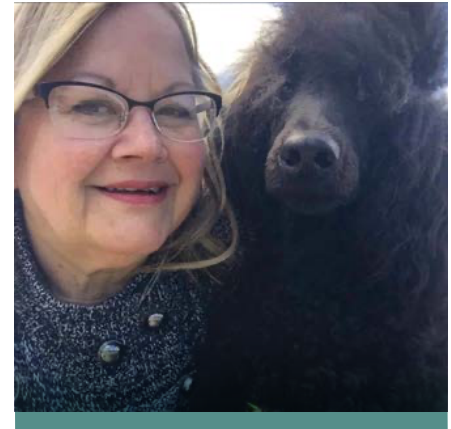
Cold urticaria is an autoimmune disorder where the skin has a reaction to the cold within minutes of cold exposure. My condition has progressed since that day, and I now get several painful reactions. All over my body, from my face to my toes, I get redness that looks like a burn, and a purple lacy rash that is a warning that hives are coming.



I get large red welts, wheals, and swelling that feels like rocks under my skin; it itches and burns and it feels like someone poured acid all over my body. I can feel sick, faint, and weak, my lips swell, my nostrils swell shut, and I feel like I cannot move.

When you feel that chill in the air, to me, it feels like a bite. My doctor instructed me to stay indoors during cold weather, wear a mask and a scarf, and not breathe in cold air – he is afraid I may go into anaphylactic shock. It can get cold here in Nova Scotia, and I need my house to be warmed to at least 25°C all year round. I constantly check the weather and wind chill because going outdoors for even two minutes can be dangerous for me. Even on a warmer, sunny day in winter, a lot of preparation goes into going out: two pairs of heavy socks, boots, mitts, hat, heavy coat, fur-lined pants, and of course a mask and scarf. I also have a remote start to warm my car and my doctor has supported me in getting an accessible parking permit so that I can park close to the door of where I'm going. When I get home, I immediately warm up with blankets, hot tea, hot soup, and a warm bath.

I look forward to summer, but I always have to be aware of my surroundings – a cool summer breeze, air conditioning, or walking by the freezer section causes a breakout. No cold drinks or ice cream for me, either. My close friends call to check on me during cold snaps, reminding me not to go out for even one minute to get the mail. I find I



Mona out with her dog Dontae in the summer

worry about things a lot, like the power going out, and it can be scary. Recently the power went out for seven days due to a hurricane and I had no heat in the house. I got really sick and my condition has gotten worse since the storm. It deeply affects my mental and physical wellbeing, and it's hard to cope at times because I know the cold can be life-threatening for me.

People don't think it's a real condition. This makes me upset because it isn't easy: all the little things you don't even think about – grocery aisles, taking out the garbage, enjoying an ocean breeze – are events that I need to prepare for so that I can go about daily life. I go on social media to share and connect with others living with cold urticaria. My hope is that if people can better understand what it's like living with this condition, we can build a more compassionate and supportive community for all. ●



Canadian Chronic Urticaria Society is a group of specialists and patients with chronic urticaria that aims to improve the health and quality of life of people dealing with chronic urticaria. www.chronicurticaria.ca