



Peeering closer, I could see a pea-sized lump in my left armpit. It was a bit uncomfortable, but not sore. 'It must be a spot,' I thought. Over the next two weeks it grew. Worried, I went to see my GP. 'It's probably a boil,' he said. He gave me antibiotics, but still the lump didn't

go. 'It's getting bigger,' I said to my fiancé Mike Trodd, now 33. As the weeks went by, the lump grew until it was almost the size of an egg. 'It's so painful,' I complained to Mike. I was taking painkillers and more antibiotics. But there was no change. Driving to work became extremely difficult. Some

nights, sleeping was almost impossible. In February 1992, my GP lanced it. Almost a litre of infected matter drained off. I was left with a hole big enough to fit my thumb inside. After six weeks, it had almost healed and I was able to return to work. Two months later, I noticed a lump in my other armpit. I was devastated. I knew it was the same thing I'd had before. My GP prescribed more antibiotics. But again, they didn't help. Within two weeks, four more lumps appeared. I

guzzled yet more antibiotics. Blood tests didn't pick up anything. 'It's as if something's inside my body, taking me over,' I cried to Mike one night. I worked as a branch manager for a recruitment agency. Somehow I put on a brave face for my colleagues. But when I got home, I couldn't stop the tears. In June that year, I was referred to a surgeon who said I had hidradenitis suppurativa — inflammation of the sweat glands. The ducts become blocked and abscesses form under the skin. These put out tracks, like roots, and other abscesses form. He said I could have

How I cope with... inflamed sweat glands

Abscesses appeared on my thighs, stomach and groin

surgery to cut out the abscesses, but this would involve skin grafts and up to six months off work. Worse still, there was no guarantee they wouldn't reappear. I hate hospitals. And I really didn't want to have a major operation

my condition is hormone-linked. And certainly I was in more pain leading up to my period. In 1995, I was prescribed the birth control pill Dianette, which has had a positive effect. Recently, I've also been taking other hormone treatments which have helped a little. Since I developed this condition, my life has changed tremendously. I always have dressings on various parts of my body and these have to be changed regularly. Whenever I feel low, Mike gives me strength

Destroying me from the inside

that might not even work. From then on, the problem got worse. Abscesses appeared under my breasts and on my inner thighs, stomach and groin. I used to play squash, go line dancing. But all that had to stop. I was in too much discomfort and didn't want people to see my body. Where the abscesses had receded, my skin was badly scarred. But Mike was my rock throughout it all. When the pain was bad, he held me until I stopped crying. There are suggestions

to carry on. He's also started campaigning to raise awareness of this condition. And that gives me hope they'll find a cure in the future.

Noriel Le Fay, 39, from Gloucester



Hidradenitis suppurativa — the facts

■ Hidradenitis suppurativa affects as many as one in 300 people, more women than men.
■ The condition is often triggered by trauma, puberty, pregnancy or the menopause.

■ Sufferers are often misdiagnosed. Because the sweat glands are affected, ignorance makes some people believe it's a hygiene problem. It isn't.
■ The Acne Support Group can supply more

information. Contact them at PO Box 230, Hayes, Middx UB4 0UT (tel: 0181-561 6868).
■ For support, contact Hide International via the Internet: <http://webhome.globalserve.net/hidecan>