

Saving My Skin

**My Way to Cure Atopic Eczema with
the Simplest Method in the World**

**»An amazing
story that gives
courage and
hope.«**
Inga, reader



Iris Seidenstricker

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To Begin With

There's a Life Without Atopic Eczema

Ways are created by walking them.
Franz Kafka

I wake up, a quick check: nothing burns, nothing itches. Not a single spot on my body that feels wet or hot. The fingers don't stick together, I can bend them without the skin tearing with nasty pain.

Through the open window the fresh morning air blows cool into my face. What a great, wonderful start to the day!

Atopic eczema—also known as atopic dermatitis—is a longterm type of inflammation of the skin. It is an agonizing, stressful illness, often difficult to bear and it is an incurable condition. But writing a book about the fact that after 45 years of living with this disease I now feel very comfortable in my skin? Why?

There's already so much literature on this subject. And you can exchange ideas on internet forums or on special platforms about how to live with atopic eczema, the most common chronic skin condition worldwide and how it can be treated.

In Germany, Austria and Switzerland it is assumed that 10 to 20 percent of the children and two to four percent of the adults are affected. In the USA, 13 percent of all children have atopic eczema. According to recent studies already seven to ten percent of the adult population already suffers from it.

In the past 60 years, the number of cases of this illness in the industrialized countries is said to have quadrupled and, according to forecasts, they will continue to increase in the future. Hardly any other disease shows this rate of increase. However, it is not entirely clear whether there are actually more cases of atopic eczema than before or whether it is simply diagnosed more often because the perception of doctors and patients has changed. Today atopic eczema is taken very seriously and people with its symptoms seek hope, help and healing both in conventional medicine and in alternative healing methods. As a result, they are being discovered increasingly and actively courted by the pharmaceutical and cosmetics industries.

Meanwhile, pharmacies and drugstores offer a wide range of creams, ointments and lotions for the special skin needs for sufferers of atopic eczema. According to a consistent opinion of doctors and scientists, consistent, permanent and daily care with everything that increases the fat and moisture content of the skin is the be-all and end-all for atopic eczema.

When I meet someone after a long time, I often hear that I look so different, even more relaxed and-how beautiful-so young ...

New hairdo? New job? Or maybe a new love?

None of these.

But it's true, I look different. When I tell them what I did, they are stunned. And they can't believe that the mere decision to omit all the creams from one moment to the next is one of the essential reasons for my relaxed appearance.

My skin, which had been severely inflamed for decades and marked by atopic eczema, was able to perform the miracle of complete regeneration within a few months.

Zero Ointment, Zero Cream

I, who learned from an early age to “cream, cream, cream” my skin to keep itching and dermatitis relapses at bay, have not used any skin care at all for four years now. My face, my neck and my hands, where the atopic eczema has always been the worst, are very happy and thank me with a healthy and stable skin.

“Have you gone completely mad?” I’m sure many dermatologists would have said if I had told them about my project “zero ointment”.

“Your skin produces less sebum than a healthy one and also suffers from a lack of certain fatty substances. The binding of water is reduced and perspiration is likely to be reduced. All these factors lead to a disrupted skin barrier, which makes your skin dry and more susceptible to infection and more permeable to pollutants and allergens. If you want to avoid this, you have to use cream on your skin with fat-containing ointments. This is the only way to improve the protection of your skin.”

The dermatologist would think for a moment and then would say with utter conviction: “And creaming, you can truly believe me, is still the very best method to prevent relapses.”

I know all of it. Not to cream completely contradicts what the medical, cosmetic and pharmaceutical industries recommend for the protection and care of the affected and irritated eczema skin. Not to mention that the care for your own skin is good for body and soul. Ever since my childhood I have therefore also supplied myself uninterruptedly with creams and fat ointments until my suffering for more than ten years became so unbearable despite constant creaming that I had to look for another way to save my skin. Paradoxically I finally found it in total ointment and cream abstinence.

Courage, Patience and Trust

For as simple as my ointment-free way sounds and as little as it costs—nothing at all in fact in contrast to many other atopic eczema therapies—it was not easy. On the contrary: it was stony and laborious. I needed infinite courage, patience, hope and trust to hold to this path and stay to the end.

Courage, because I didn't know if this way would really lead me to the healing of my skin. Hope, because I had already tried so much to heal or at least alleviate atopic eczema, and nothing helped in the long run. Patience, because it only went forward in tiny steps, which often felt as if nothing would change or as if everything would get even worse: itching, new heat, smoldering. And I needed the trust that my body has powerful and extremely effective self-healing powers and that these would also be active after all. And above all I needed people who also believed in this way and gave me their confidence when mine just faded away.

I can only talk here about my own experience with my own inflamed skin, of what helped me and what didn't. That doesn't mean it has to be the same for others. How often did I run excitedly to the nearest pharmacy to get the wonder ointment XY. Because someone in an Internet forum passionately reported to have finally found the one and only solution for his or her atopic eczema. Most of the time my skin already burned at the first contact with the new ointment or it itched unbearably. Having lost another hope, I set out again in search of the miracle product, the true "Holy Grail", which would finally give me healthy skin.

Captive of the Skin

Atopic eczema is a disease that can not only rob your strength entirely, but also your self-confidence and, again and again, your joy of life.

Atopic eczema has shaped or influenced my development, my career decisions and my relationships. It influenced my daily routines and it was the reason for my capriciousness. I have shunned people, said goodbye to them when the others were still celebrating or were just beginning to do so. And my appointments were made long in advance, hoping that my skin would calm down in the meantime. Of course this rarely happened. At the last moment I often cancelled the appointment because I didn't want to show myself. Almost my whole life I felt unwell and sick in my skin, unsightly and unsafe. It was a boundary that separated me from others and made me lonely. Because the skin locked me in a prison and put me under strict "skin arrest" over and over again.

During a lecture in a skin clinic, a dermatologist spoke about the fact that despite a skin disease the joy of life should be maintained. "Above all," he appealed to us chronic eczema patients, psoriatic and allergy sufferers in the audience, "don't withdraw. Mingle with people, take part in social life. Enjoy!"

I got angry. Someone with healthy skin—at least that's what he looked like—called on people who were marked by their sick skin to take life easy.

I've never liked advice. But advice from someone who obviously had no idea what sort of agony and massive restriction atopic eczema can mean was completely off the mark. How can you enjoy life with a skin that you constantly want to rip off your body to free yourself from it?

I know people with atopic eczema who, when they come home from work, first scratch themselves bloody with a brush or they shower with almost boiling water. Because the pain of the injured skin or hot water numbs for a short time

the unbearable itching that feels like a thousand mosquitoes biting at the same time.

How can you have a desire for people and community when your own skin sticks to your face like a thick, hot, mask of dried mud and you have neither the strength to look at yourself nor the strength to endure the looks of others?

“Have you ever had a really severe sunburn including your face, too?” was my standard question when someone actually wanted to know what atopic eczema felt like. Most of them had experience with sunburns. “Okay” I said then, “and you’re sitting in the sauna and can’t get out. You are locked in the sultry heat, it gets hotter and hotter, your skin burns and you don’t know when the door will open again. That’s exactly how my face feels now.”

I wouldn’t be upset about the clinic doctor’s call today. On the contrary, I agree with him. Because even if I’m not well, that doesn’t mean that I have to sink into suffering and make my life completely dependent on atopic eczema. That is what I was doing for years. Work, relationships, hobbies, eating, sleeping—I subordinated everything to the disease and yet tried to remain efficient and functional. Because I wanted a “normal” life. And this meant an almost constant struggle.

In 1891 the French dermatologists Louis Brocq and Lucien Jacquet suspected a connection between chronic eczema and mental processing and called it “neurodermatitis”.

In the 1930s a connection between neurodermatitis and allergies was established and the term “atopic dermatitis” or “atopic eczema” was added as a new technical term.

Atopic eczema manifests itself through inflammatory skin changes in the form of eczema, severe itching and red, swollen skin areas. The skin is dry and sensitive, but the appearance of atopic eczema can vary strongly from person to person. Why someone suffers from atopic eczema has not yet been found out exactly. Scientists have identified genes that might have something to do with it. But it is not the genetic material alone—atopic eczema also occurs without hereditary predisposition. It is therefore not a hereditary disease, but nevertheless a hereditary tendency to fall ill with these symptoms.

It is now assumed that psychological factors and environmental influences provoke the outbreak of atopic eczema. External factors are allergens such as pollen, animal hair, the house dust mite or food components, diet, the climate or mechanical stimuli.

As with all illnesses, the psyche plays a decisive role: depending on the condition you are in and how you cope with stress and the strain of the illness, atopic eczema can improve or worsen. More about this in chapter 4.

Body and Mind

“We can never get out of sadness if we constantly feel our pulse,” Martin Luther recognized 500 years ago. And puts into words what neuroscientists—the researchers who deal

with the structure and function of the nervous system and the brain—can impressively prove with their research: body and mind are one unit. We are what we think we are. We think what we feel. And we feel what we are.

If I am constantly concerned with my skin, with how it tortures and impairs me, then all my feelings and thoughts will focus only around my skin and the impairments I feel through it. Doing so I just make increased what bothers me.

Of course, I can't feel well with acutely inflamed skin. Inflammation robs you of vitality, you are tired, cold or perhaps you feel like you have fever. You're just sick. Then you should expect only what you want to put yourself through and otherwise create a space of retreat and protection – that's part of the care you can and should do for yourself during an eczema flare-up. But there are also phases of the disease that makes it possible to participate in life. Which, however, requires a decision. Which you can meet against the disease—"I'm going out the way I am now"—or in favor of the sickness—"I don't see any other way and continue to suffer".

Atopic eczema is a justification for all the things, appointments and tasks you would like to avoid. You always have an excuse. And that is just one of the many advantages it offers.

Children, in particular, draw attention from it, and adults may be able to take a rest only because of their inflamed skin. You may have been in need of rest and recreation for a long time but you never admitted it or others finally show you more consideration, which they would not do without the disease. And if you only have to take care of your skin, there is neither time nor energy left for all the other small and big daily topics and problems that are also there. But who could blame you?

When I looked at the benefits of atopic eczema because I began taking on a new perspective, I understood for the first time what kind of advantage I had taken from it.

Learning from Atopic Eczema

The gain from illness is a tremendous power. You have to force yourself to give it up. I had to learn a tremendous amount over the years to take away from atopic eczema the importance it had had for most of my life. Strategies in dealing with stress, for example or to listen more to my gut.

I had to learn to accept, to value and to support myself. And finally I had to find the form of nourishment that is equally good for my soul and my body. But above all, I had to understand that no matter what I look like, I can trust people.

I have always found this to be quite a challenge, because fears and experiences inherited from our ancestors also play a role here. In early cultures people kept away from people with skin anomalies and deliberately excluded them. It was like a death sentence to them, because by themselves, far away from the clan, survival was hardly possible. Perhaps this primal fear of rejection, which is deeply anchored in our subconscious, prevented me from showing myself to people.

Today I experience daily how my feelings and thoughts guide my life. And how important joy, gratitude and inner peace are for my health and therefore also for the condition of my skin. However, I cannot afford to wait for the good feelings to fall into my lap. If I want to feel comfortable, I have to choose it. And then do something to get this feeling.

Even very small things get my positive feelings flowing and thus strengthen and balance my immune and hormonal system. For example, I feel gratitude for a chirping bird in the morning, the cool air on my skin, the person in my life by my side, the delicious breakfast. I feel gratitude for my

work, which I can do with my ideas, my creativity and according to my schedule. Joy is of course also part of my positive feelings, as well as laughing, enjoying and relaxing. And last but not least, I need people around me, but I also enjoy the precious time I can spend with myself alone.

I have learned slowly and by many painful setbacks that health and the certainty to feel well in my skin are not static states, which from now on—after so many years finally reached—I can have for eternity. That's always been my vision. How I would have loved to have had the very last flare up of atopic eczema once and for all. But it wasn't like that and it doesn't work like that.

Fact is I've never felt better about my skin than today. But can I know what the future holds? The thought of the future has always worried me in the past. Today I agree that I have no idea what's coming but in the meantime I am confident that I will be able to cope well with all the tasks and challenges that life will give me.

I have come to understand and accept that my skin will always respond to feelings, to the influences of the surroundings and to what is happening in my life. And above all the way I deal with myself. Just as I sometimes have a cold or a headache, drink too much coffee, have too much chocolate or too little rest, my skin is redder or drier, my finger itches or there is a scaly spot on my chin. But that's nothing compared to the time when atopic eczema dominated my life.

I feel healthy today. In the same sense as the World Health Organization (WHO) defines health: "Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and is not merely the absence of disease or infirmity."

Healthy Skin

45 years of atopic eczema. The work on this book has allowed me to relive all the gravity and tragedy of the last decades and how much strength it took me to endure the atopic eczema again and again. And even more, because I rejected and hated it. And I wished for nothing more than that it would finally disappear.

My friend Ferdinand, a teacher, told me about one of his former pupils who had severe atopic eczema from an early age. He bravely fought his way through his school days, which were interrupted by many hospital stays. Shortly before the end of his studies he took his own life. Although I had not known this young man, I was shocked by the news of his death. Because I know how much energy everyday life with atopic eczema costs, how unhappy and desperate you are again and again and how hopeless everything often seems to you.

“Put up with it,” a doctor told me, “that you will be dealing with atopic eczema all your life. If things go well and you take good care of your skin, you can relieve the symptoms. Then you have already achieved a great deal. But there is no cure.”

Oh no, there is a cure! At least for me without any skin care at all. Or just because of the renunciation of the daily repeated application of ointments and creams. Right there, my atopic eczema stopped. Healthy skin is no longer a rare exception, it is my daily life now. And every day an amazing wonder for me.

I still experience my “new” skin as an unforeseen redemption, I am certainly relieved at least a hundred times a day that nothing is hot, nothing is wet, burns, and my face has clear contours because there is no inflammation that leads to swelling. Countless times during the day I indulge in

the happiness that my skin feels like “nothing”, that I enjoy fresh water on it, I go outside and come back inside without feeling temperature differences and itching and looking in the mirror doesn’t cost me any effort anymore. On the contrary: I’m happy about what I see!

Of course, the small and big challenges of my life are still there, and new ones are constantly being added. In fact, dealing with a skin that is no longer a “problem skin” is also one. But now I am in a position to tackle and master them without the existential burden of atopic eczema. I am always happy about that and I am deeply grateful for this.

And this is exactly why I wrote this book. I would like to encourage all those who suffer from atopic eczema to continue to search for their own way and not to give up hope that one day you will feel good again in your skin and in your life. Even if it is often very difficult or sometimes even seems impossible—in the images and feelings we connect with our hope, a secret and powerful energy flows and pushes us step by step towards our goal.

As different as we all are, as different and intertwined are the ways that lead there. Some atopic eczema sufferers have been healed by faith in their God. Others swear by raw food and don’t eat grain. Yet others benefit from eating cooked meals according to the teachings of Traditional Chinese Medicine—they predominantly eat warm meals with cooked grain. All ways work, all have already contributed to making people feel better or even get healed. But probably there is no way that works for all.

Ointment Abstinence-The Decisive Step

I know from my own experience that the constructive and untiring efforts to tackle atopic dermatitis always open up new perspectives that move us forward. By trying interesting suggestions and plausible therapies, you get to

know yourself in such a thorough way as it would otherwise hardly be possible.

Some things may have to be tried several times because the body reacts differently in each phase of life. And the willingness to follow a certain way is sometimes greater or smaller, depending on life situation and healing progress. It took me three attempts to not cream until I was really ready to follow the strategy “zero ointment” and to throw away all the ointment tubes and cream pots I had stowed into the box in the attic.

This step was the decisive one to save my skin. The suitable nutrition, the loving contact with my body, constructive, good thoughts and effective stress management were and still are also part of it. Because recovery is always a holistic, ongoing process and in my opinion you can only succeed with it if all aspects of life are included.

My journey to healthy skin, the feeling of well-being in my body and the joy of my life was a decade-long search with highs and lows, full of setbacks, hope, disappointments and suffering until I finally discovered the hidden, narrow and barely walked on way of total ointment and cream abstinence.

In the following chapters I will tell you about this way and the many paths that all led me a little further to my feel-good skin.

P.S.

I translated “Saving My Skin” with my non-professional English skills and thank Hedy from the bottom of my heart for her great support with the translation.



Chapter 1

Survival. Somehow.

*External crises are the opportunity
to pause and become aware.*
Viktor E. Frankl

My face is glowing. My skin tightens and burns, my left eye feels swollen. In the right cheek pulsates a sharp pain, stickywet warmth crawls up my neck. The bedroom window is wide open and I can hear the wind in the trees. But I don't feel the cool morning air. Just the sultry heat on my face.

Is it the toner dust? Or the printer's ozone? I was in the copy room a lot yesterday. Paper jam, toner empty, new toner cartridge inserted, waiting for printouts.

Or was it the tomatoes in the sauce for lunch? Or maybe the raisins in the salad? I hadn't eaten any for years and I avoid grapes consistently. How stupid to eat raisins with this skin condition. Or maybe I should finally do without my breakfast apple. Too much fruit acid ...

The right calf is on fire, it feels like bloody scratches. And there's that diabolical itch in the little finger again. I rub until the skin surface is rubbed down and lymph fluid flows. A hot, sharp pain. But at least the itching is gone. My sultry neck's on fire, too. I'm palpating it, the big scab is gone. I must have scratched it at night. The gloves I've been wearing again at night are lying somewhere in my bed. They're no good either, they make it even easier to rub the skin down to the raw flesh.