

# Models With Psoriasis Strut To Raise Awareness

by PATTI NEIGHMOND

September 14, 2009

text size **A A A**

The music blares. And one by one, models strut the catwalk as *Project Runway* television host Tim Gunn introduces them.

But these are not your typical models — they are winners of a nationwide contest for psoriasis patients.

The contest, called "Addressing Psoriasis," is the cornerstone of an awareness campaign aimed at helping people with moderate to severe plaque psoriasis get more information about managing their disease and feel more confident in their everyday life.

Sponsored by drug manufacturers and consumer self-help groups, the event also aims to demystify psoriasis for others and help people understand that this is not a contagious disease but an individual skin disorder that can be treated with some success.

Eight winners modeled custom-designed creations by students from the Fashion Institute of Technology.

Cindy McGowen, of League City, Texas, wore a spaghetti strap dress showing off her arms, which were covered with psoriasis. "I have it on both my elbows, both my knees, both my ankles. I have large patches up the back of my triceps, some patches that go down to my wrists and on all of my knuckles. I also have a different pattern they call the raindrop pattern where it just sprinkles little dots on different parts of your body."

All the models, including one man, have severe cases of plaque psoriasis, the most common form of the disease, which affects 80 to 90



Enlarge

Lost Artist Studios

Isabel Estevez, who was diagnosed with severe plaque psoriasis as a young girl, walks the runway at the Addressing Psoriasis fashion show.



Enlarge

Lost Artist Studios

Isabel Estevez poses with Tim Gunn, host of television's *Project Runway*, at the Addressing Psoriasis Fashion Show.

percent of people with psoriasis.

## Dispelling Misconceptions

Psoriasis is a chronic, lifelong disease believed to be caused by the body's own immune system turning on itself, causing the skin to go into "overdrive" and produce red, inflamed patches on just about any part of the body, including fingernails, toenails, genitals and the scalp.

It is not contagious, but uneducated strangers often think it is. At its most severe, it can be very painful and itchy. It comes and goes, and no one knows exactly why outbreaks occur.

### Web Resources

Learn More About Psoriasis From The National Psoriasis Foundation

Visit The 'Address Psoriasis' Web Site, And Meet The Eight Winners Who Walked The Runway

The skin disorder is believed to have a genetic component. Factors that may aggravate outbreaks include stress, excessive alcohol consumption and smoking.

For Isabel Estevez, the kind of publicity and support offered by events like this was quite literally, she says, lifesaving.

Estevez was diagnosed at 5 years old. At 9, she had an experience that shaped her life.

She was at a water park. "My skin was pretty bad broken out and a young girl approximately my age with her mother saw my skin and immediately freaked out and tugged on her mother and [said], 'Oh my god what's wrong with that girl?' " she says. "The mother looked at me, shocked, equally in terror, pulled her daughter away from me, and just said, 'Just stay away.' "

For years after that, Estevez wore pants and long sleeves, no matter how hot or humid it was outside. She never wore her hair up. She wore jackets all the time. Then, luckily, she says, she did

an Internet search on psoriasis and found the National Psoriasis Foundation, which happened to be having a conference in Chicago, near her home.

"I genuinely thought I was gonna show up at this conference and I would be the only one there," she says. "Imagine my eyes when I walked in and there was a room full of 500 people, all with psoriasis, all who knew what I was going through. I saw people exposing their skin and not afraid, and it in turn gave me the inspiration to do the same."

Today, Estevez says, she wears whatever she wants. Long sleeves if it's cold, short sleeves if it's hot. If a friend invites her to a beach, she'll go.

### Searching For A Treatment That Works

There is no cure for psoriasis. And treatments often fail or wear off over time. Some people use anti-itch creams, which often contain cortisone or other steroids. There are ointments that contain tar, creams that reduce scaling, dandruff shampoos, moisturizers, vitamin D or A. Oatmeal baths can soothe and ultraviolet light treatments can help.

In severe cases, there are medicines to suppress the body's immune response.

But the most promising treatments, say dermatologists like Mark Lebwohl, chief of dermatology at Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York, are relatively new drugs called biologics, which came on the market about five years ago.

Lebwohl says most biologics are forms of antibodies that are directed against specific parts of the immune system. However, there are concerns about potential side effects. Because the drugs suppress the immune system, patients may be more vulnerable to certain infections and even malignancies.

On the horizon, however, Lebwohl is looking forward to approval of a new biologic that appears to be safer and more effective than those currently available. It is now awaiting federal approval from the FDA.

Lebwohl says an injection of the drug just four times a year clears the majority of patients. He calls it a "true breakthrough."

In clinical trials, about three-quarters of patients with severe psoriasis who received the drug saw dramatic improvement. In nearly half of the cases, the psoriasis cleared completely.

### Related NPR Stories

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[Worlds Of Bacteria, Alive On Your Skin](#) May 28, 2009

[New 'Project Runway' Location But Same Tim Gunn](#) Sep. 11, 2009

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## comments

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Recent First



**Mary Altenpohl (mla)** wrote:

With all due respect, PJ Leary, what was the "news" of this story? That a drug company and one of its sponsored organizations held a press event? Stop the presses: there are people out there with non-fatal but aggregating chronic conditions and they find some relief in medication and/or support groups. While I'm sure the free exposure is great for the drug companies and organizations involved (and be sure to remember your pals at public radio at pledge time!!!), it's a big nothing for the rest of us in terms of news value.

September 15, 2009 9:26:05 AM CDT

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**beth aaron (beth )** wrote:

Here's a link to Dr. John McDougalls discussion with people who also have it.  
An FDA approved injection is a grand waste and only supports our wanting pills and invasive injections to solve our problems. We are a drug addicted nation and wonder why kids are using everything they can get their hands on.....UGH!

<http://www.drmcDougall.com/forums/viewtopic.php?t=8008&sid=f4bd37a61136d0ee91d250d5035050cd>  
September 15, 2009 9:14:49 AM CDT

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**beth aaron (beth )** wrote:

Another absurdity from the FDA. This condition is cured through diet, as it is an allergic reaction to either dairy, wheat, or something that is being injected that the body is rejecting. Acne is the same issue , animal fat clogging glands.  
www.notmilk.com or www.drmcDougall.com or www.ravediet.com have far better answers than for profit drug companies that get FDA approval for drugs that have heinous side effects and were shoved down hundreds of poor animals throats....  
Our agriculture needs a complete reform. Our health is a direct juxtaposition to agriculture.....  
True brakethrough indeed. More like ego mania and profit driven nonsense. Everything we need for pure skin is found in whole foods. When we eat a proper diet, we glow.

September 15, 2009 9:03:08 AM CDT

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**PJ Leary (SEPEAS)** wrote:

In response to the comments about Ms. Estaviz that were negative and dismissive, please consider these facts. I first met Ms. Estaviz at the Conference she references in her interview in Chicago. I was a mature adult woman who had lived with very severe skin & joint disease since my teens. She was a very young woman looking for support and guidance.

I can attest to the fact that Ms. Estaviz is even more lovely on the inside than she is on the outside. I can also confirm her assertion that the meeting in Chicago changed her life, I know that it did.

In the years after that, I watched her lobby her Members of Congress for psoriasis patients, many times in the beginning years as the youngest member of our group. She has remained politically active even when she has not been able to get to DC.

She has actively mentored many youth through her personal contact as a youth mentor, using the Foundation resources to everyone's best advantage. She has encouraged others as frightened as she initially was with her kindness and insights. In short, she was a model in so many other ways long before this event. I'd like her to be credited with those accomplishments, for they are very substantial.

Regards,  
PJ Leary  
SEPEAS Volunteer Manager  
September 15, 2009 4:19:41 AM CDT

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**PJ Leary (SEPEAS)** wrote:

I want to respond to several comments, some of which have been echoed by multiple individuals. First, this is not a "fluff" news item. Psoriasis and psoriatic arthritis are serious auto-immune diseases that often have a profoundly negative effect on many areas of patients' lives. These areas are well documented in studies that have been published by the National Psoriasis Foundation, and include psycho-social issues, co-morbidity issues, and sometimes even personal mental health issues such as depression. The assertion that psoriasis is not a genetic disease is simply false since the genome project and individual researchers have identified several dna markers for the disease.

The suggestion that psoriasis patients are all able to maintain normal skin health with changes in diet and nutrition is also false. While it is true that a small percentage of patients are seriously relieved of or "cured" of their symptoms, that is not true for the majority of patients. This is well documented scientific fact.

Please see following comment.

Regards,  
PJ Leary  
South East Regional Volunteer Manager  
Associated with the National Psoriasis Foundation  
September 15, 2009 4:06:21 AM CDT

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**Mona Begonia (RosieH)** wrote:

Wow, I'm really surprised at the callousness at many people leaving comments today. First of all, there is not a 1 to 1 correlation with diet and psoriasis as so many of you seem to assume. I myself have tried candida/gluten free diets to no effect. Second of all, this condition has impacted my own life severely. I am too self conscious to have any intimate relationships. I had to move from the North East to Florida because the cold weather aggravates it and I couldn't stand living that way anymore, despite the fact that I had to leave all my friends and family. I found this piece to be very touching. Have a little heart.



**Jada Rufo (tanyujie)** wrote:

Ms. Estevez is a courageous woman. It is not easy for a person with psoriasis to expose herself like that. I know because I have been her shoes. I've gotten stared at by "uneducated strangers". I've never seen the show Project Runway but now I will have to look for it on the air. Bravo to Ms. Estevez, to Project Runway, and to NPR.

September 14, 2009 5:40:30 PM CDT

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**Ann Mitchell (ChemistMom)** wrote:

There is only one severe skin disease (other than allergies) that I know of that is directly related to diet: this is dermatitis herpetiformis, an autoimmune disease which is celiac disease's evil twin sister; celiacs get GI ailments, DH sufferers get large nasty blisters which don't go away until you are entirely gluten free for at least a year. It is intensely itchy (one of the itchiest known to man) and leaves large purple scars.

After reading the above comments, all I can say is if changing your diet relieves your symptoms, all the better for you; however, don't try to preach the food gospel to others whose metabolisms are quite different than yours.

Lastly, although some referred to it as a 'fluff' piece, it was nice to have the fluff paired with a real science story, and to interview people whose lives are affected by skin diseases. Until you've had one, you have no idea how traumatic they can be.

September 14, 2009 5:25:07 PM CDT

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**Jessica Jones (jjnscat48)** wrote:

I'm not sure they emphasized the term "auto-immune" enough. There are plenty of autoimmune diseases out there and yes while stress MAY exacerbate them it does not cause them.

Psoriasis is a weird and finicky disease. It can flare and go into remission with no rhyme or reason. Some people need massive amounts of meds, some don't. Corticosteroids are dangerous because they cause atrophy of the skin. Some drugs taken internally can be very dangerous and the side effects are not worth it. UV light helps. Psoriatic arthritis is a problem that goes along with the skin symptoms of psoriasis.

Try going back to some of the simpler and more old fashioned preparations for psoriasis such as tar and UV light. Dead sea bath salts help too.

September 14, 2009 5:22:06 PM CDT

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**norman richardson (skep)** wrote:

I have had psoriasis for 60 yrs, only two things seem to help: #1 the sun can make a dramatic difference; but there is a terrible price to pay in latter years (it's a judgement call) #2 Avoid languishing in hot tubs, hot showers. The simple fact is: the more you can avoid "washing" the less troublesome your psoriasis will be, but it requires a little ingenuity to keep your self "presentable" (the odor causing parts of your body are rarely plagued with psoriasis; it is the areas that are usually dry that are visited. So you take care of the troublesome areas and try not to make the dry areas dryer. Not a panacea but it helps.

September 14, 2009 4:40:34 PM CDT

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