

THE JOURNEY BEGINS

July 2008:



It was a warm summer day. I glanced out my kitchen window and unexpectedly saw two calves munching on the lush green grass in the county park adjacent to our ranch. I immediately called my neighbor and then dashed into the park to shoo them back to their own pasture. The owner joined me and we successfully got them back through a broken fence. The fence was repaired, the calves were safe, and the park's grass remained intact, minus a few bites.

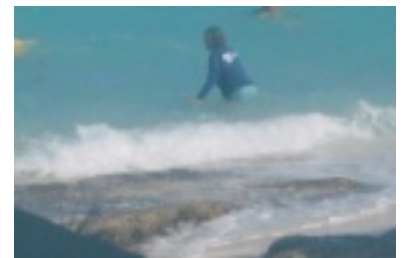
In a few hours, a red rash broke out on my arms. I had seen this before because as a child, I had contracted poison oak numerous times. This was a surprise because for the past sixteen years, I had ridden my horse near blooming poison oak and without a reaction so I assumed I had built up an immunity to poison oak.

During the following week, the rash continued to spread to my face and hands. My doctor prescribed a mild cortisone cream and recommended the well-known calamine lotion. There was intermittent relief and I continued with my daily activities even though my energy was low.

August 2008:

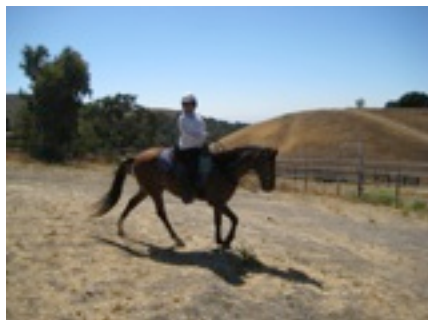
I was looking forward to a family vacation to Mexico even though the rash continued. A few days before our departure, I consulted my doctor who prescribed a stronger cortisone cream. With packages of prescription creams, ointments, and calamine lotion, I escaped to Mexico in spite of the red, itchy rash on my arms and face.

Within 12 hours of arrival in Mexico, the rash completely disappeared. For two weeks of vacation, I was totally free of the rash. I ate a variety of foods, slathered sunscreen on my body (which the pharmacist had recommended), wore a long sleeve snorkeling shirt with a PF 30 rating while I snorkeled and body surfed the large waves. I conscientiously avoided the sun. The prescribed creams and lotions were not even opened and my skin was healed.

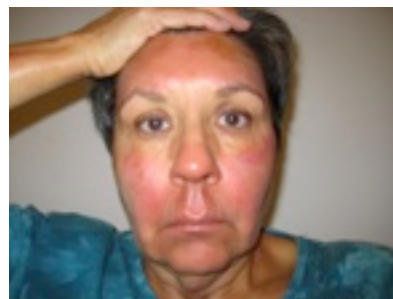


September 2008:

With my skin completely healed, I returned home. It was good to see my family, friends, and greet my horses, dog, and cat. The day after returning home, I went for a horseback ride with a friend. We saddled up, sprayed the horses with a new fly spray from Europe “with natural organic contents”. The spray spilled over onto my face and my arms in a mild mist. We applied “outdated” sunscreen because I had used all of my other sunscreen in Mexico. We rode for a couple of hours. Upon the completion of the ride, we did the usual clean up of the horses and ourselves. Soon after we finished cleaning up, I had the same rash breakout on my face, arms, and a few patches on my legs.



This time the burning rash was severe and looked like a chemical burn. Just below my left eye was a red patch the size of a 3x5 card. Above my chin, above my lips, and on my forehead were similar burns. Near my wrists and forearms were more burns. The entire rash was hot to the touch. I applied cortisone ointment without immediate relief. I was referred to a dermatologist.



October 2008 Visit to the Dermatologist:

Upon the examination of the rash, the dermatologist commented, “This is an allergic contact dermatitis. You are coming in contact with substances that do not usually provoke a reaction in most people.”

I was given research to consider, homework to complete, and a suggested course of action. I was a cooperative patient. I read the handouts about skin allergies. I changed my bathing soap, my laundry detergent, and faithfully applied the cortisone ointment. I stopped wearing jewelry and make-up -- a real sacrifice for me. My only relief from the itchy burning rash was to apply ice packs to my arms and face. I welcomed the cool night air to provide added relief. My energy level dropped and my frustration increased. My left hand began to itch and the normal lines in my hands and fingers became cracked and bloody. Now I would have an excuse to not wash the dishes. But seriously, I would have traded doing stacks of

dishes in order to have my hands clear of their burning, itching, and swollen condition.

The months that followed:

After many more episodes of breakouts, I was tested in a painless allergy patch test on my back. The patch test showed a reaction to nickel (Ni), sodium thiosulphatoaurate ($\text{Na}_2\text{S}_2\text{O}_3 \cdot 5\text{H}_2\text{O}$), gold (Au), and palladium chloride (PdCl_2).



I wanted to learn about these metals and find them in my environment. In 2008, the very year all of this began for me, the American Contact Dermatitis Society named nickel the Allergen of the Year, and earlier in 2001, they had proclaimed gold the Allergen of the Year. Until my doctor visits, I had never heard of such a thing as a nickel reaction!

The... patient should be made to understand that he or she must take charge of his own life. Don't take your body to the doctor as if he were a repair shop.
~*Quentin Regestein*

My Version of Nickel Allergy:

The research showed me that my immunity system came in contact with these metals in various forms, and after years and years of exposure said, “That’s enough!”

Furthermore, there is this phenomenon that the immune system “remembers” where I contacted these metals. For example, I might hold my horse’s nickel bit in my hand and not have a reaction on my hand, but I would have a facial breakout later. Or I would wear my gold wedding ring and have a break out on my arms. So the message in all of this was to identify and eliminate these allergens from my life. This wasn’t going to be easy, as I was finding out that nickel is one of the most common metals in the modern environment, both at work and at home. Nickel reportedly causes more dermatitis than all other metals combined.

I decided I was not going to settle for temporary relief though the use of steroids. I

would practice vigilance, determination, investigation, prayer, and any other answers that might become available. I realized that there are so many other health issues that are more serious than this, and I believed God could use this for my ultimate good. (Romans 8:28)

Eventually my dermatologist referred me to an allergist. More patch tests followed. Again, the results were the same: nickel, sodium thiosulphatoaurate, gold, and palladium chloride were the allergens.

Now I would partner with my allergist in more research. His name is Dr. Hope (honest!!). We are working together in this journey. I keep him informed as to my discoveries and progress.

The “I” in illness is isolation, and the crucial letters in wellness are “we.”
~Author unknown

According to Dr. Hope, stress could exacerbate, or worsen, the rash. Indeed, I was experiencing stress for a variety of reasons. I focused on getting adequate sleep, reducing my speaking engagements, and eliminating most sugars from my diet. I took new precautions in my daily routines. In feeding my horses, even though grass hay wasn't suspect, I wore a bandana on my face like the cowboys used to wear on cattle drives and I wore a long a slicker with long sleeves and gloves.

Still another major breakout happened and I couldn't identify the cause. I was miserable and it was time to leave the premises and a cruise beckoned to Mexico. Again, within 12 hours on board the ship, the rash disappeared.

November 2008:



As fall approached, my breakout subsided enough for me to have new pictures taken for my website. I spoke for a few events, hopeful I wouldn't have a major facial breakout. I kept a journal and tried to keep copious notes of my daily activities. It seemed when I became lax in writing notes, I would have a breakout and had to try to retrace my steps.

Every patient carries her or his own doctor inside. Albert Schweitzer 1875-1965

Discovery -- Rash-breakout Causes Identified:



I was printing out a large color picture of my facial breakout for my allergist, Dr. Hope. Some of the yellow color smeared on my hand and I touched my cheek and dabbed my runny nose. I met with the doctor and showed him the photo I had just printed. Upon my return home, my face erupted in another major breakout.

That was the day I learned about the Material Safety Data Sheet (MSDS) designed to provide information about the proper procedure for handling or working with a particular substance including toxicity, health effects, first aid and much more.

The website <http://householdproducts.nlm.nih.gov/index.htm> was invaluable and added a new dimension to my research. I located the colored ink cartridge and it listed the contents, as well as the possible side affects upon the skin -- a perfect match to what I was experiencing, even though I didn't see the word nickel. Manufactures of products are not required to list **all** the ingredients in their products, as there is something called "trade secret" or "proprietary formula rights" and that is where I suppose the nickel or other allergens could reside.

The ink jet printer was removed from my office, and with my doctor's recommendation, I purchased a laser printer. No further breakouts from printing documents have occurred since.



Discovery -- Garden at Friends' House:

My friend, Linda, invited me to participate with a group of ladies in a luncheon and Bunco event at her lovely home. We played Bunco and enjoyed lunch. Just as I was about to leave, I remembered her lovely garden. I strolled among the flowers, admired the garden designed by her husband, Dennis, and salivated at the budding Kiwi fruit which they so often shared with others.

I said my goodbye and began my drive home. Unexpectedly, I felt the rush of heat

on my check and I knew I was headed for a major breakout. I had no idea what had caused it. I retraced my steps throughout the day. There was nothing unusual about my day -- until I remembered the stroll in the garden. I immediately called Dennis. "Have you done any spraying in your garden recently?" I asked. "Well, yes, yesterday I sprayed for termites, yellow jackets, and ants." I then learned that some insecticides contain nickel.

Discovery -- my Glasses:



Duh! You would think I would have considered the metal frame on my glasses right away. Even though I had worn them on every trip during every waking hour and never had a breakout, I nevertheless got new glasses when I was informed my former glasses frame contained nickel. Goodbye old glasses, welcome new stylish and nickel-free glasses.



Discovery -- Garbage Day:

As most households do, once a week we get ready for garbage day. It seemed that there was a correlation of breakout on the day we collected the garbage and recycled products. What was it about garbage day that caused my rash?

It took almost four months to figure this one out. It was my routine to buy fresh flowers from either the local farmers market or the grocery store. I would typically handle them, remove leaves, and unconsciously touch my cheek and dab my nose. When I stopped handling all fresh flowers, no more breakouts occurred on garbage day. Also, I alerted my gardener and pest control company of my allergy to nickel in insecticides and pesticides. They then started using alternatives that are safer for me and healthier for our environment too.



Dr. Hope suggested I buy a nickel testing kit. I ordered one from <http://www.allerderm.com/>. I have used it to test antiques, purse adornments, cooking utensils, jewelry, purse zippers, horse equipment, and coins (only positive test was on the quarter not a nickel) and anything of suspect.



As I researched further, I became aware of such things as nickel plating, batteries, dyes, insecticides, orthodontic and dental appliances, keys, zippers, scissors, cooking utensils, chrome and brass, eye shadow, coins, some white and 14-kt gold jewelry, and eyeglasses, to name just a few. I also considered my wool blanket, water softener pellets, bottled water, foods I ate, perfumes, lotions, weeds in the field, my horse tack, and on and on.

August 2009:



One of the worst breakouts occurred just before I was going on my annual vacation to Mexico. I was in such distress, I was thinking of canceling. However, with ice packs on my arms and ice bags soothing my cheeks on the long flight, I arrived in Mexico. I checked into our resort and the following morning the rash had disappeared. For the following three weeks, my face, arms, and legs healed.

Upon my return home, my breakout was minimal until I bought hay and helped with the loading and unloading at the barn. Is there something in the hay? Is there something in the barn? I can go for weeks in and out of the barn with no reaction, and then without understanding why, one day I experience a rash breakout. This is still a puzzle.

Discovery -- Dental Procedure:

It was just a small filling on the enamel of my front tooth. The dentist used aluminum chloride and it made a fine dust on my face. After the procedure, I immediately washed my face, but within three hours, I still had a terrible outbreak.

Just to rule out the possibility of any food allergies, I had my last patch test. Fortunately there was no evidence of any reaction to food. Thank goodness for that!

During the spring of 2009, I was privileged to tour Israel and Egypt. I had no breakout for 15 days. After my return home, I again continued to have breakouts and kept searching for the causes in my environment.

A New Year:

I welcomed 2010 with a minor breakout, which I believe was caused from decorating the Christmas tree with ornaments probably containing nickel. I am still battling occasional breakouts, but each time, I am hopeful to uncover more clues as to the causes.



According to Dr. Hope, stress can add to my breakouts. So for the New Year, I am committed to taking better care of myself. I am striving to get enough sleep, exercise, eat healthy foods, pray, do what I enjoy doing, be with friends, laugh heartily, and with God's help, become the person He wants me to be.

Please, if you have any experience with nickel allergy or nickel poisoning, let me know. Most teachers want feedback from those they teach. If this has been of any help to you, let me know. If this information is not useful at this moment, please remember it for someone else's potential benefit in the future. It has been rewarding for me just to see where this journey is taking me. I will continue to update this series as it relates to nickel, including readers' contributions where appropriate.



The appearance of a disease is swift as an arrow; its disappearance slow, like a thread. ~ Chinese Proverb