

MEDICAL

Scarred for life

Learning to live with keloids

By Radhika Dandeniya

Sleeveless dresses, swimming suits, strappy tops: How I wish I could wear them! However by doing so, I would have to endure people staring at the keloid scar on my left shoulder.

During conversations, I notice my companion's eyes constantly flickering towards it. Every time I go into a shop and see that the only nice dresses available are sleeveless, I feel like a reject of the fashion industry. Such is the life of a keloid victim.

With more and more people undergoing surgical procedures, the number of cases involving keloid growths has increased. Yet for the reason that they are harmless in comparison to strokes and heart attacks, they have fallen by the wayside in terms of medical exposure. Therefore people do not know what a keloid scar is when they see it. This results in victims becoming self-conscious; hiding their scars in avoidance of being asked awkward questions.

My keloid scar resulted from a BCG vaccination I received at the age of six. As my parents and I never knew what it was, and it hardly

bothered me, we did not seek any treatment.

However during my teenage years it became excruciatingly embarrassing for me to let people see it. At dances I would make do with a sleeved top and skirt rather than an elegant dress. When I sought treatment I was told that if I had acted sooner, it could have been removed, which was hardly helpful at the time. What I am trying to do now is reduce or flatten my scar, but even that is a long shot!

Keloid comes from the Greek word 'chele' which means crab's claw, that refers to the claw-like appearance of tissue, which develops around an injury site or scar area. Typically, the injured area will have an overgrowth of skin coloured red or purplish, which will rise up from the site and form a keloid.

Harmless as they are, they can be painful and tender to the touch. Although the scars are innervated with blood vessels, they lack the oil glands and elastic tissue that normally protect the skin against irritation consequently making them itchy. They are most commonly formed on the upper back, shoulders, chest,

upper arms, face and neck, as a result of piercing, tattoos, major surgery (e.g. heart bypass and caesarean section) or skin injuries.

Removing keloids is far from easy. There is no textbook procedure because every keloid is different. Besides surgical excision, there are many other ways such as laser treatment and radiotherapy to remove them. Steroid injections and silicon strips can promote flattening of the scar, thereby improving its appearance. However, all these techniques bring mixed results.

Anoushka (not her real name) has suffered from a series of keloid formations. Her first keloid was the result of a BCG vaccination she received in her early teens. "As a baby I had eczema and so the doctors decided to inoculate me when I was older," she says.

Luckily for Anoushka, her parents knew what a keloid was. "My parents read a lot about things like this and so from there we pursued medical treatment."

With quick action, she was administered injections once every three weeks for six months at the Sri

Jayawardenapura Hospital. It hardly cost her anything and her scar was considerably reduced.

For some, the removal of a keloid can be frustrating, especially for those who want to remove one that formed when they were very young.

The problem with many of the treatments is that they often require multiple visits (every 30 to 90 days), which can be costly and inconvenient for the patient. Furthermore, if you choose to remove it surgically, recurrence of the keloid is possible. In worst cases, it can come back bigger and more disfiguring.

Dr. M.J.P. de Silva runs a skin clinic in Colombo. With more than 45 years experience in dermatology, he recommends 'Intra-lesional injections' as the most efficient way of reducing a keloid scar. "At the moment total removal of a scar is not possible, but from what I have seen, these injections seem to be better than other methods," he says.

Internet sites also contain extensive information and products for treatment of this deformity. However, Dr. de Silva is sceptical about such remedies guaranteeing 'total eradication' of a keloid. "I

have not come across any such product that has been successful in removing keloids," he says. "It is best for patients to seek medical counsel rather than resorting to the internet."

The best advice for people prone to keloids is to avoid any kind of skin injury that can cause them to develop. African and Asian people are more susceptible to this kind of scarring so it is even more important for such people to take extra care of themselves. As to why some are more predisposed to keloids than others remains a mystery. Medics surmise that it could be an

unknown genetic defect.

Diet regulation is also another factor in reducing keloid formation. Basically six things are found in food that the body needs to heal a wound: protein, vitamins A, C, and E, selenium and zinc. The protein is needed by the body to help make new tissue whilst the vitamins and minerals support enzymes that re-build the tissue.

Prevention is important, but the problem is that you do not know that you are susceptible to keloids until you have one. In that case the psychological damage (being the worst result of such scars) has already

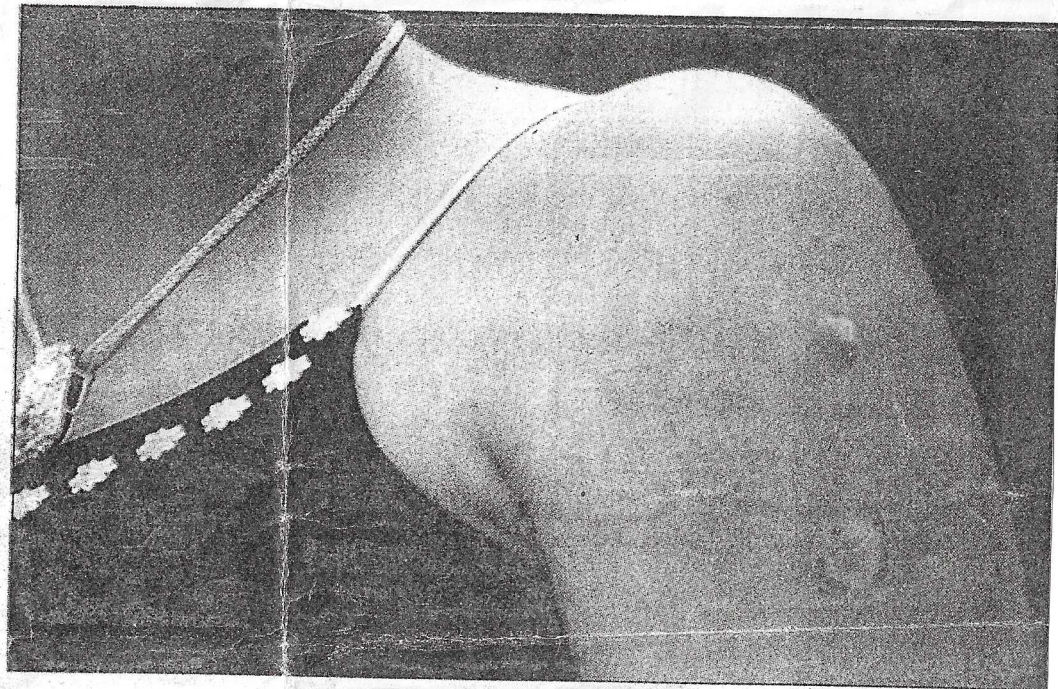
taken its toll. The only prevention you can do is to avoid further scars. But how realistic is it to ask someone to avoid any kind of injury?

Fair enough, keloids hardly feature on the world's most life threatening list, but does that mean that they do not warrant the medical attention? The lack of public awareness makes life for a keloid patient hard. Although questions such as 'Does it hurt?' or 'Can I touch it?' arise from innocent curiosity, they invariably make you feel like a travelling freak show.

Doctors should do more

research and keep people informed about keloids so that victims can act quickly and live without the embarrassment of a scar.

At the end of the day dealing with a keloid is upto you. As Anoushka concludes, "Regardless of whether you are male or female, it depends on your self esteem; after all you can easily live with a keloid." With quick action you can probably improve its appearance. As for me, I have resigned myself to living with my close friend - 'Floyd the Keloid' until a successful removal technique is discovered!



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