

## Ointment made from hot pepper helps soothe skin pain, irritations

SAN ANTONIO (AP) — The burning was so painful that Reyes Martinez sometimes couldn't touch the soles of her feet.

"About the only place I went was to the doctor and to church," she said, explaining that she was desperate for anything that might ease the skin pain caused by her diabetes.

She found cool relief in an unlikely source.

Martinez and other patients at the University of Texas Health Science Center are using the purified extract of hot peppers to soothe skin irritations sometimes caused by diabetes and shingles.

"I said, 'Well, I eat a lot of the chili peppers,'" said Martinez. "I don't care how it's made — I'm just glad it helps."

Researchers say it's the stuff that makes a pepper sting that can help ease skin pain. The substance is called capsaicin, a concentrated derivative of hot pepper resin.

Capsaicin is the active ingredient in a medicated cream called Axsain, being tested at the Texas Health Science Center's pain clinic and 19 other medical cen-

ters in the United States and Canada.

It takes more than 1,000 pounds of peppers to produce one ounce of powdered capsaicin.

Axsain isn't the first medication to use capsaicin, but it contains the most concentrated dosage to date, said Joan Hoffman, a nurse and pain clinic investigator who coordinated studies on the cream at the San Antonio center. Three physicians also took part.

"I think patients come to studies like this because they're hopeful that it's going to work," Hoffman said. "It's interesting to them because it's peppers."

The pain clinic is conducting two blind studies using the hot pepper cream.

One involves 20 patients suffering from post-herpetic neuralgia, or pain caused by shingles. A medical center in Canada is testing another 20 patients with that affliction. The other San Antonio study involves 40 patients with diabetes.

Though final results are not in, preliminary indications are that the pepper cream helps, Hof-

fman said. Sixty-nine percent of patients with pain from shingles showed improvement after treatment, according to the health science center.

Capsaicin helps ease burning by blocking pain messages carried to the brain by C-fiber nerves, which are associated with burning and cold sensations, researchers contend.

Though the pepper applications seem to relieve pain eventually, the cream does cause a burning sensation when first applied.

"(It's) just like when you touch jalapenos with your hands. Well, you touch this, and then if you touch your eye with that cream on your hand it burns," Hoffman said. "It won't damage your eyes. But it is hot."

The side effect prompted some patients to drop out of the study. But researchers say the burning subsides with the frequency of application.

"It's kind of like you're desensitized to it. Just like, I guess, eating jalapenos," Hoffman said.

Diabetics usually don't have as much problem with the side ef-

fect from Axsain as do shingles patients, because the pain diabetics sometimes experience often is accompanied by slight numbness.

Study participant Stella Murphy, 59, said the burning was bothersome, but she stuck with the program in an effort to soothe her shingles pain.

"It really saved me," Murphy said. "It was a little bit of a hassle. It does burn pretty much, just like hot peppers would."

Murphy and others in the study applied Axsain several times a day for eight weeks.

After the initial eight-week period, in which patients are sometimes given the real cream and sometimes a placebo, study participants enter a one-year test during which they are given the real cream and monitored.

The cream's manufacturer, Illinois-based GalenPharma, a company formed last year to produce the product, is closely watching the studies.

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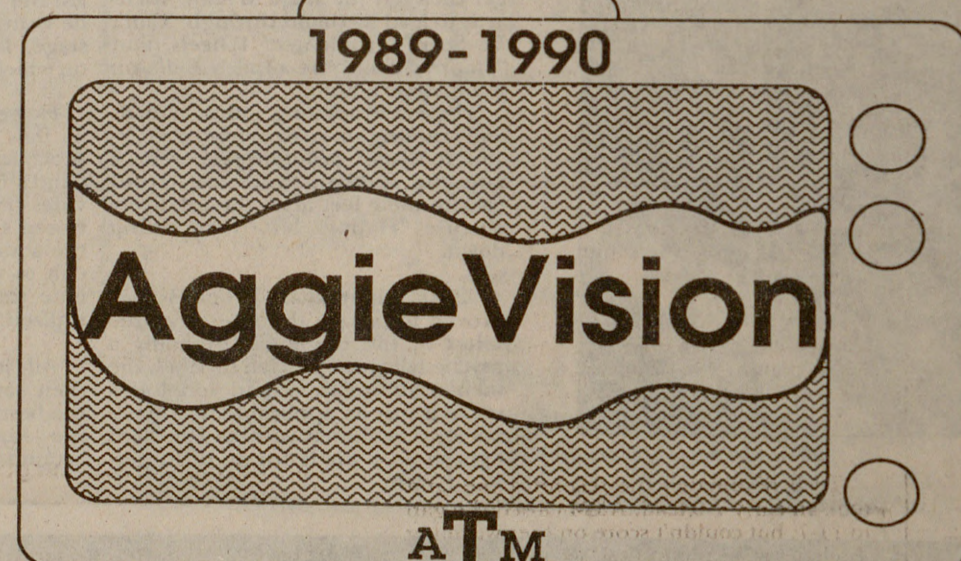


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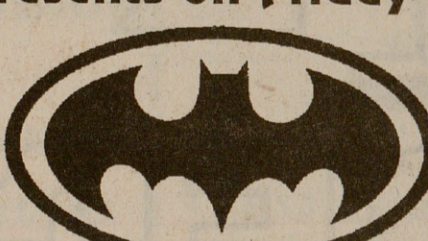
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