

'If you have eczema like me, don't be embarrassed'

By SYLVIA HUBBARD

Sizzling country star LeAnn Rimes is showing a lot more skin these days. For years, she performed in layers of clothing to cover evidence of the battle she has been fighting all of her life - a red, scaly, itchy skin condition called eczema, which affects 35 million other Americans.

Having eczema and appearing on stage in front of thousands of people takes courage. "It was really hard to cover myself when I was on stage," LeAnn tells *The National Enquirer* in an exclusive interview. "I often wore two pairs of pantyhose to try and hide the red blotches on my legs."

Two years ago, she found a way to keep her eczema at bay, and now she feels free to wear sleeveless blouses and swimsuits - clothing she would never wear in the past. In celebration of her new-found freedom, LeAnn wants to tell other sufferers that they, too, can find help.

"Celebrities suffer from the same things as everyone else. And that's why I came out and told everyone that I have eczema," says the 22-year-old singer. "I was diagnosed with eczema when I was two years old. By the time I was six, I had scales all over my body. I was always trying to find out what was wrong with me."

Eczema is often an allergic reac-

Country singer
LeAnn Rimes
talks about the
skin condition
she tried to keep
secret for years

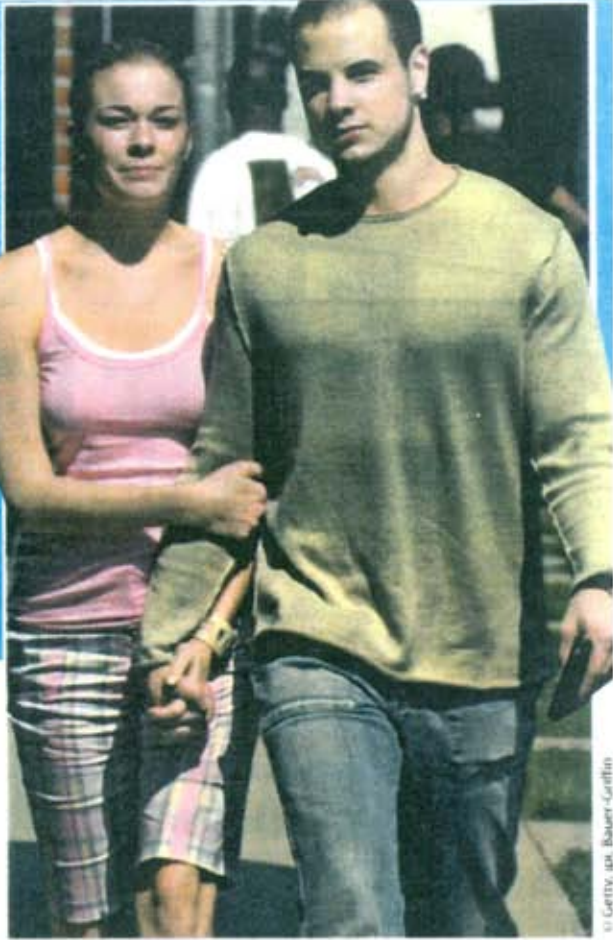
tion to irritants such as detergents, metals or certain foods. It can be hereditary and although there is no cure yet there are many ways you can minimize the discomfort and distress which eczema can bring.

When LeAnn started school, it became more difficult for her to cope with her condition. "Kids can be very cruel," she recalled. "They didn't have skin that looked like mine and they teased me."

At home, LeAnn's parents always gave her loving support and got her good medical care. "The eczema covered 80 percent of my body," she says. "It was on everything except my hands, feet and face."

LeAnn became a huge singing star in her teens but was plagued by her painful skin condition. "It is a very debilitating disease. Eczema

LOVE AND SUPPORT:
LeAnn with husband Dean Sheremet



© Getty, ap. Bauer-Gottlin

absolutely limited my lifestyle."

LeAnn often saw dermatologists and experimented with a variety of treatments. "I've tried everything under the sun," she says. "I tried light therapy and steroid creams, but I wasn't happy with any."

Finally, after years of struggle, LeAnn found a doctor she could trust. "Finding the right doctor is a major key," she says.

Her doctor helped her find the "triggers" that caused outbreaks. "With me, stress was a major trigger," she says.

LeAnn also discovered other things that would help keep her condition in check. "Hot showers trigger itching, so now I use luke-warm water," she says. "I never rub my skin, I pat it dry with a soft towel, and I always moisturize at least three times a day. I also wear

cottons and other soft fabrics."

In addition, LeAnn uses the prescription medicine Elidel to control outbreaks. "I've been clear for two years," says LeAnn proudly, who's been married to her very supportive husband Dean Sheremet since 2002. "It's been so freeing to wear whatever I want. It's like I don't have eczema any more. It's so nice to find a treatment that allows me to be so free with my body and my mind."

Now LeAnn urges other eczema sufferers to get help. "There are millions of Americans living with this condition. There are treatments now that can be used on children and they are safer than those we've had in the past. If you have eczema, you need treatment," she says, firmly.

"If you went to a doctor five or 10 years ago and treatments didn't work or you weren't comfortable with them, go back. Don't be embarrassed. It's just a condition you have. There is no cure, but there is help."

● To learn more about eczema, visit www.treateczemanow.com or call 1-877-MYECZEMA

FAST FACT.....

In 2000 LeAnn's father and her former manager, Wilbur Rimes, stole over \$7 million from her