

Teen With Rare Water Allergy Shares Her Story

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Water plays an integral role in every aspect of our lives, from keeping hydrated to cooking. But while water is a source of life for almost everyone, it ruins the quality of life for a Utah teen who suffers from a rare water allergy. The waves came crashing down on Alexandra Allen, 17, of Mapleton, when she was diagnosed with aquagenic urticaria at age 15, forcing her to bury her dreams of becoming a marine biologist and living on a sailboat.

“It's not worth it anymore,” Allen told [Deseret News](#) about avoiding water. “It's both emotionally strenuous and physically painful. I can't let myself go there.”

The teen suffered her first severe allergic reaction at age 12 while on vacation with her family. She went swimming in a hotel pool and later that night woke up covered in hives. Initially, Allen's family thought she was allergic to chlorine or some other harsh chemical, but after taking a dip in a lake known for very clean water, it became a much larger concern.

After a self-diagnosis and several tests from dermatologists, including soaking in a tub of water and other forms of exposure, she said, "it was similar to torture." It was then that she was diagnosed with aquagenic urticaria (AU).

The water allergy is so rare that there are fewer than 100 cases that have since been published in scientific literature. A 2011 [study](#) published in the journal *Annals of Dermatology* describes AU as a rare form of physical urticaria, in which contact with water causes severe allergy-like symptoms, regardless of its temperature or source, be it rain, snow, sweat, or tears. Lesions form mainly on the upper body, including neck, trunk, shoulder, arms, and back.

“It feels like your skin has been sandpapered down until there's only one layer left and it itches, but you can't itch it or it will break and burn and bleed,” Allen said. “You just feel like you've been dipped in a vat of acid, not for long, but for long enough to tear off a layer of skin.”

The rare water allergy can be developed even during adulthood. In 2009, 21-year-old [Michaela Dutton](#), was diagnosed with AU after giving birth to her son. She now cannot drink water, so instead drinks Diet Coke, which her body can tolerate, although it contains carbonated water. Doctors believe Dutton's AU was caused by a hormonal imbalance brought on by giving birth. However, the exact onset of AU is not fully known, but elevated histamine levels are suspected to trigger allergic reactions.

Similar to Dutton, Allen has made adjustments in her life to adapt to AU. The teen, who also suffers from severe dyslexia and attention deficit disorder, says she doesn't want any of her

ailments to define her. Allen considers herself lucky and believes that her conditions are tolerable and manageable compared others.

The teen pursues other non-aquatic hobbies and interests, including writing a [blog](#), learning to play musical instruments, and even rock climbing, among many others.