WELLNESS

HOW TO EXPLAIN HS TO FRIENDS WHO DON'T UNDERSTAND THE CHRONIC ILLNESS

Spoiler: It's deeper than skin.

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JUNE 11, 2026

You text the group chat that you can't make it — again — and you can feel the silence judging you. What your friends don't see is that a flare can mean lesions painful enough that sitting, walking, or even getting dressed just isn't happening today. When you live with hidradenitis suppurativa (HS), the hardest part often isn't the condition itself; it's helping people who've never dealt with chronic illness to *actually* get it.

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You don’t owe anyone a medical lecture. But a few clear facts, delivered on your terms, can save you a lot of future frustration. Here’s how to break it down.

Start By Killing The Hygiene Myth

If you only correct one thing, make it this one. The most common misconception about HS is that it comes from having poor hygiene, and that’s flat-out wrong. Dr. Nicole Ruth, a board-certified dermatologist known online as @TheDermDoctor, says it’s actually driven by follicular occlusion, immune dysregulation, genetics, and environmental factors. As Dr. Debbie Palmer, a board-certified dermatologist, puts it, friends really just need to know HS isn’t contagious, isn’t sexually transmitted, and isn’t caused by unclean skin.

> "“I’M HAVING A FLARE DAY AND NEED TO REST. I’LL CATCH YOU NEXT TIME” IS A COMPLETE SENTENCE. "

So if a friend asks whether you’ve tried showering twice as much, you have a one-liner ready: “It’s an immune thing, not a hygiene thing, scrubbing doesn’t help.” Said once, calmly, it usually sticks.

Explain Why It’s Not “Just Acne”

People reach for the closest thing they know: a breakout. The distinction matters, though, because HS is genuinely debilitating. Ruth notes that while acne affects the face, chest, and back, and eczema presents as itchy, inflamed skin, HS involves deep, painful nodules and abscesses in the skin folds that can leave scars and form tunnels under the skin.

You can frame it for friends like this: It’s not a surface thing you can spot-treat — it’s an inflammatory condition that goes deep and hurts. That reframe alone tends to shut down the unsolicited skincare advice.

Tell Them What A Flare Actually Feels Like

This is the part that makes canceled plans make sense. Most people hear “skin condition” and picture something mild and cosmetic, so they don’t get why you’d bail on brunch over it. Spell it out. Ruth describes a flare as painful inflamed nodules, swelling, drainage, bleeding, and tenderness that can make walking, sitting, exercising, or even

wearing clothes uncomfortable, sometimes severe enough to interfere with daily life. In her words, that makes a canceled plan "a medical necessity rather than an overreaction."
Translation for the group chat: You're not flaky — your body is physically preventing you from showing up. Friends who hear it framed that way tend to be empathetic.

Make It Clear It's Bigger Than Skin

The lesions are only half of it. HS follows people off their skin and into their whole day. Ruth says the impact reaches mental health, sleep, mobility, work, and social life, and that HS can be deeply isolating because patients so often feel misunderstood, which is exactly why this conversation is worth having. Palmer points to the same broader picture, noting that beyond the pain, HS can bring fatigue, lower self-esteem, anxiety, and depression.

It's not in your head, either. HS is frequently cited as having the worst quality-of-life impact of any skin condition, and a meta-analysis in *JAMA Dermatology* found depression and anxiety hit people with HS at significantly higher rates than the general population. So when you tell a friend it's more than skin-deep, you've got the receipts.

Set Boundaries Without Feeling Bad

Here's the part nobody tells you: Constantly educating people is its own kind of exhausting. Lori Bohn, PMHNP-BC, DC, a board-certified psychiatric-mental health nurse practitioner, says people with HS often get drained from explaining their limits over and over, which can curdle into guilt or a fear of seeming unreliable. Her fix is permission you might need to hear: Set boundaries without over-explaining. "I'm having a flare day and need to rest. I'll catch you next time" is a complete sentence. You don't owe a doctor's note.

Bohn also says to notice who actually shows up. Pay attention to the friends who consistently respond with understanding and flexibility, and lean toward them. A big goal in therapy, she says, is helping people see HS as something they manage, not who they are. You are not your flare schedule.

The friends worth keeping are the ones who read "I can't today" and reply with understanding, not silence or accusation. Spend your energy on them.

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