



# THE CELTIC GENE

FINDING YOUR PASSION

We chat to inspiring women from all walks of life.

*Ann Teehan talks to Chrissie Russell about raising awareness of the most common genetic condition in Ireland.*

**E**ight years ago, Ann Teehan visited her doctor after suffering from some bad tummy pains for a few days. A couple of weeks later she was diagnosed with a potentially life-threatening genetic condition.

But rather than feeling frightened by her diagnosis, Ann saw it as a positive, not only because it explained various symptoms she'd been experiencing for years or because it meant she could alert family members to get tested. It was also because knowing she had the condition meant she was in a position to do something about it not only for herself, but for other people too by raising awareness.

The condition was **haemochromatosis**, the most common genetic condition in Ireland, but also one about which there continues to be little awareness. The Irish **Haemochromatosis Association (IHA)** estimates that 20,000 people in Ireland are living with undiagnosed cases of **haemochromatosis**, with one in five people carriers and one in 83 predisposed to develop it – earning the condition the nickname 'The Celtic Gene'.

In cases of **haemochromatosis**, large amounts of iron are absorbed from the diet into vital organs causing iron overload. If left untreated, this iron overload can lead to organ damage and even premature death. The fact that lack of awareness could be leaving people at risk is one reason why Ann, alongside the IHA, is determined to share her story and put **haemochromatosis** well and truly on everyone's radar.

Having worked in nursing for more than





20 years, the condition had been one that mum-of-four Ann from Co Wicklow was already aware of. "It's not something we looked at very much in my training, I suppose it's a little bit more specialised, but I knew what it was, you'd hear people calling it 'the Celtic Curse'," she says. "And I knew that, because your blood goes through your whole body, it's something that can damage your organs and affect a lot of different areas."

Some people can develop arthritis where the joints are damaged, others might experience excess iron build-up in the heart, which can damage the muscles of the heart. **Haemochromatosis** can also cause liver damage and lead to diabetes if the pancreas is damaged by too much iron.

One of the frequent symptoms associated with the condition is fatigue. This is something TV presenter Mark Cagney spoke out about when he was diagnosed with haemochromatosis some years back, and how, like many busy people would, he'd initially put that tiredness down to his early starts working on morning TV.

Mum-of-four Ann similarly dismissed her tiredness as just part of life. "I just used to put it down to being a busy mum," she says. "I had a shop for a while so I just thought, 'Ah it's the kids and the shop'. I always had an excuse for it, but if I sat down for any length of time I'd be asleep. Once I got the diagnosis it was like a lightbulb moment, it made sense to me."

Interestingly, managing the condition was something Ann was already doing – donating blood. As a genetic condition, **haemochromatosis** can't be cured, but it can be effectively and easily managed by venesection – the removal of blood – with frequency of treatment dependent on the amount of excess iron in the body. Regular blood tests are also required to measure the amount of excess iron in the body, and in some cases, supplements and a diet limiting (though not eliminating) foods very high in iron, like red meat, may be recommended.

Knowing that **haemochromatosis** is hereditary, Ann quickly alerted her mum,

Lily, and sister, Fiona, who were tested and also revealed to have the condition. They quickly took action to avoid adverse health impacts, but interestingly, not all family members were keen to find out.

"Some people didn't want to know and, when Mum said to them, 'Go and get tested', they weren't keen," reveals Ann. "I understand totally that nobody wants to have health issues, but

this is one that you CAN control, IF you know about it. And it can be controlled really easily."

Ann donates blood (blood banks are happy to accept blood rich in iron) every three months and gets her blood tested once a year, while her mum and sister also have blood drawn on a regular basis in a hospital setting. "**Haemochromatosis** sounds like a big scary word, and it can cause serious problems, but it's something that, if it's caught early, all those problems can be

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prevented very easily by drawing off blood," she says. "The danger lies in not knowing."

Her four kids have not been tested for the condition yet, because simply knowing that it's something to watch out for, as well as knowing firsthand how easy it is to deal with, helps Ann feel in control.

"It really doesn't worry me at all because I know they can get the blood run off and it's not an issue," says Ann pragmatically. "It's very manageable and I can keep an eye on things for now and they will get tested when they're a bit older."

She laughs: "It's really nothing to be scared of – it's something you can totally manage, but you can't manage it if you don't know about it. All it takes is a simple blood test."

If someone has symptoms (see panel) or if anyone in their family has **haemochromatosis**, she recommends seeing their GP to get tested. But Ann, who still works in nursing and has recently also launched her own Home Organisation Service (after working on the BBC series *Sort Your Life Out*) hopes that her own story, and how easily she lives with **haemochromatosis**, will inspire others.

"It feels really good to be doing something positive with my diagnosis," smiles Ann. "If there are some people who have never even heard of it who read about it and go, 'I think I'm tired all the time', then go and get checked out. If it helps them and might prevent other complications, sure that's fantastic." WW

## SYMPTOMS OF HAEMOCHROMATOSIS

**Iron builds up so slowly, symptoms may not appear until age 30 or 40+. These include:**

- Unexplained weakness or fatigue
- Abdominal pain
- Diminished sex drive or impotence
- Arthritis, particularly if it occurs in the first and second knuckles
- Diabetes
- Liver disorders
- Abnormal heart rhythm
- Discoloration or bronzing of skin
- Mood swings and irritability

Individuals with **haemochromatosis** will develop at least one or two of these symptoms in a mild form, and while many of these symptoms can be found in other disorders, when arthritis affects the first two finger joints, it is highly suggestive of **haemochromatosis**.

Visit [haemochromatosis.ie](http://haemochromatosis.ie).