

Skin Dry and Itchy? What to Do. Winterizing Dry, Itchy Skin.

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Dry, itchy skin can become a real problem as the cold winter months set in. Because of the need to use artificial heat, the humidity of the air is lower than at other times. There are several factors that contribute to dry skin: inherited factors; metabolic factors such as an underactive thyroid gland or excessive weight loss; increasing age that results in decreased natural lubrication; cold weather; wind exposure; low humidity; excessive bathing, showering or swimming, especially in strongly chlorinated cold or hot water; the use of strong soaps or detergents; and frictional irritation or chapping that is commonly seen on the lips. People with atopic dermatitis are especially vulnerable to itchy skin during winter. Atopic dermatitis is a skin condition associated with allergies, asthma or hay fever.

Identify Problem Factors

What should you do? First, identify and tackle any contributing factors like the ones mentioned above. Drink lots of water - internal hydration keeps the cells healthy. Avoid alcohol and caffeinated drinks which are dehydrating. Turn the thermostat to the lowest setting to keep your home comfortable. If you don't have a central humidifier in your home, you can add room humidifiers. Keep baths or showers short, limit them to once a day, and use warm water. If bathing, add a few drops of baby oil or bath oil to the water, but be careful - it can be slippery. Soap should be used only when and where needed (under the arms, groin and feet). Milder less drying soaps include Dove, Aveeno for dry skin, and Oil of Olay sensitive skin soap. My favorite is Dove. For the face, use a mild liquid cleanser. I like Cetaphil. After bathing or showering, gently pat the skin partially dry (don't rub it), and apply a moisturizer or bath oil.



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Moisturize! Moisturize!

Moisturizers can be reapplied during the day as needed. Pay attention to elbows and knees. Pay extra attention to hands and feet, where skin can crack and peel when dry. Always apply moisturizer after you wash your hands. Limit exposure to water by wearing gloves when doing chores, such as washing dishes. If your hands are dry, buy a pair of cloth gloves from any pharmacy or grocery store, apply Aquaphor before going to bed, and put the gloves on. A good moisturizer, suitable for your skin type, is a must in winter to keep skin lubricated and protected.

There are four classes of moisturizers. **Ointment moisturizers** have the greatest ability to trap moisture but have a greasy consistency. Examples are Aquaphor and plain Vaseline. **Oil moisturizers** are less greasy but still effective. Examples are baby oil, mineral oil and vegetable oil. **Cream moisturizers** are usually white and disappear when rubbed into the skin leaving a greasy feel. Examples are Eucerin cream, Nutraderm and Neutrogena. **Lotion moisturizers** are suspensions of oily chemicals in alcohol and water. These are generally the least greasy and the most pleasant to use and are quite popular. However, because they contain alcohol, they can make the skin dry.

Watch Out for the Sun

Weekly exfoliation is important to remove dead cells and prevent skin from looking dull. Treat any red eczematous (dermatitis) patches with a topical over-the-counter steroid. Last but not least, do not forget sun protection. Even if the days are cloudy, the sun is still behind the clouds. If you are practicing winter sports, remember that snow reflects the sunlight, doubling the damaging effect of the sun's rays. Wear a natural lip balm to protect your lips. If, after following all these steps, your skin is still dry and itchy, get an appointment with your physician.



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