

Dry Skin

» Tips for Everyday Care

Dry skin is common, especially in the winter. Dry skin, also called xerosis, is not usually serious, but it can be uncomfortable. It is most common on the lower legs, arms, sides of the abdomen and thighs. Symptoms often include scaling, itching and cracks in the skin.

Most dry skin is the result of environmental factors. The good news is that these factors can be controlled or partially controlled. This means many people can improve the look and feel of their dry skin by making changes in their daily routine.

Why Is Your Skin Dry?

Generally, skin becomes dry because it lacks water or oil. Here are some ways this can happen:

- Skin is driest in winter, because temperature and humidity levels — the amount of water in the air — decrease. The reverse can be true in desert regions, where temperatures remain high, but humidity levels are low.
- Central air and heating, wood-burning stoves, space heaters and fireplaces reduce humidity in the air.
- Showering or bathing often, especially for extended periods of time and in hot water, breaks down lipid barriers in your skin. This also happens when you swim frequently, especially in heavily chlorinated pools.
- Harsh soaps or detergents remove lipids and water from the skin.
- Like any type of heat, the sun also dries the skin.
- Thyroid disorders can reduce the activity of your sweat and oil glands, which leads to rough, dry skin.

Home Treatment

The following treatments are easy to add to your daily routine at home and can help replace moisture in the skin:

- Use lukewarm water when you shower or bathe. You should limit your time in the shower or bath to 15 minutes or less per day.
- Avoid using harsh soaps that are drying to the skin. Deodorant soaps are one example. If you need to use them, limit their use to areas that may develop an odor, such as the armpits, feet and genitals. Use creams or cleansers with added moisturizers or mild soaps with added oils and fats.
- When cleaning, don't use a washcloth vigorously. When you towel off

after getting out of the bath or shower, don't rub the skin. Blot or pat the skin so that some moisture remains.

- Apply a moisturizer to your skin — ideally, do this right after a shower or bath so that the moisturizer holds in the moisture from the shower. Products labeled “creams” are often more effective than lotions. Use a product containing oil if you have severely dry skin.
- Apply a moisturizer with a sun protection factor (SPF) of at least 15 to all areas of the body that are exposed to the sun, such as the face, ears, hands and back of the neck.
- Use a humidifier in your house when you turn on central heating in the winter. This will add moisture to the air. You can use a portable humidifier, or one that attaches to your furnace.
- Drink lots of water and other liquids to keep skin moist.
- Wear breathable natural fibers, such as cotton and silk. Wash your clothes in detergents that are free of dyes or perfumes, because both can irritate your skin.

Dry Skin Complications

Make sure you care for your dry skin. Without simple treatment, dry skin can lead to complications such as the following:

- atopic dermatitis (eczema), which results in redness, cracking and inflammation
- folliculitis, an inflammation of hair follicles
- cellulitis, a potentially serious bacterial skin infection. Cellulitis can affect the skin's surface, or it can affect the skin's underlying tissues, spreading to the lymph nodes and bloodstream.

When to Seek Medical Care

Although dry skin often gets better with changes in your daily routine, you should see your health care provider if any of the following occur:

- redness develops
- you can't sleep because of the dryness and itching
- you have open sores or infections as a result of scratching
- you have large areas of skin that are scaling or peeling
- your skin just doesn't improve, even with your best efforts. **NP**

The information in this handout was gathered from several sources, including the American Osteopathic College of Dermatology (www.aocd.org) and Mayo Clinic (www.mayoclinic.com).

Additional Notes:
