



Dry Skin Care

Many people suffer from dry skin, particularly on their lower legs, elbows, and forearms. The skin feels rough and scaly and often is accompanied by a distressing, intense itchiness. Low humidity - caused by overheating during the winter and air conditioning during the summer - contributes to dryness and itching. Anything that further dries your skin - such as overuse of soaps, antiperspirants, perfumes, or hot baths will make the problem worse. Since few of us work in jobs where we regularly get really dirty and require a thorough bath or shower to allow us to intermingle with other humans after work, daily bathing is our skin's worst enemy - do it less frequently! Dehydration from any cause (medications, drinking alcohol containing beverages or caffeinated beverages, sun exposure, and smoking cause dry skin, and even stress may cause dry skin.

Skin Care and Protection is Vital

Throughout life, your skin undergoes a lot of wear and tear. This wear and tear and photo damage from the sun is cumulative (the damage adds up) throughout your lifetime. As you age your skin becomes thinner and gradually loses some of its elastic quality. Your skin has fewer sweat and oil glands than when you were young, hence dry skin and itching become more common as you age! Your skin is also more easily injured and heals more slowly as you age.

The older you get, the more important it is to take care of your skin. Common complaints as people get older include dry and itchy skin, wrinkles, sagging skin, color changes, and "age spots." Even more worrisome, however, is the possibility that some of those age spots may turn into skin cancer. The more sunburns you have had, and the more lifetime sun exposure, the higher your risk for skin cancer! Look for moles that suddenly appear, grow, or change color. Feel for dry, rough skin lesions that do not go away and for small blood vessels showing as red lines on the cheeks, nose, and ears.

You are most at risk of sun damage to your skin if you:

- Have fair skin that freckles and burns easily
- Live near the equator or at high altitudes
- Work outdoors
- Enjoy outdoor hobbies and recreation
- Sunbathe

Dry skin itches because it is irritated easily. Dry skin and itching can affect your sleep, cause irritability, or be a symptom of a disease. For example, diabetes,

thyroid, and kidney disease can cause dry skin and or itching. Some medicines make the itchiness worse.

The most common treatment for dry skin is bathing less frequently and the use of moisturizers to reduce water loss and soothe the skin. Moisturizers come in several forms - ointments, creams, and lotions. Avoid scented varieties as the scents and colorants may be irritating to some.

- **Ointments** are mixtures of water in oil, usually either lanolin or petrolatum.
- **Creams** are preparations of oil in water, which is the main ingredient. Creams must be applied more often than ointments to be most effective.
- **Lotions** contain powder crystals dissolved in water, again the main ingredient. Because of their high water content, they feel cool on the skin and don't leave the skin feeling greasy. Although they are easy to apply and may be more pleasing than ointments and creams, lotions don't have the same protective qualities. You may need to apply them frequently to relieve the signs and symptoms of dryness.

Moisturizers should be used regularly and indefinitely to prevent recurrence of dry skin. The best and cheapest moisturizer is petroleum jelly (*Vaseline*).

Other Helpful Measures:

- A **humidifier** can add moisture to the air in winter months - keep it by the bedside.
- **Drink plenty of water** unless you have heart or kidney disease. Talk to your family doctor about this.
- **Bathe less often**, say every other or third day, and wash only genital areas, underarms, and feet with a washcloth and mild cleanser. This provides adequate cleanliness for most of us who do not engage in daily physical labor.
- Using **milder glycerin based soaps** or special prescription skin cleansers like *Cetaphil* also can help relieve dry skin.
- **Bathing in cool to warm water** is less irritating to dry skin than hot water, and limit bath or shower duration.
- **Avoid chlorinated swimming pools** and especially spas or hot tubs that combine chemicals and irritating heat. If you do indulge, then shower off afterwards with cool water and finish off with a liberal application of lotion over the entire body.
- **Avoid saunas** - concentrated dry heat and dehydration is devastating for already dry skin!
- **Avoid the sun!** If that is not possible, then avoid the sun from 10:00am to 2:00pm when the sun is most intense. If that is also not possible, then

cover as much of your skin with light, loose clothing as possible and wear a wide-brimmed hat and sunglasses. Liberally apply a sunscreen with an SPF greater than 15 on a regular basis, and reapply every few hours if you sweat heavily or swim! See our **Sunscreen Article** for more info.

- Keep your body healthy with good nutrition, including supplements, regular exercise, and plenty of regular sleep!
- Evaluate your clothing and cosmetics - your skin may be sensitive to certain cosmetics or fabrics that can be irritating. Use undyed cotton fabrics if possible.
- Review your medications with your primary care doctor – some cause itching!