

LOCAL HEALTH TALK

The Cold Truth About Winter Skin

The days are getting shorter and the temperature has started to drop. For many people, especially those with sensitive skin, the winter months mean healthy skin becomes dry, itchy, chapped, and rough. In addition, for those with common skin problems such as eczema and psoriasis, the winter months can bring about a serious flare of their condition.

One of the main reasons for these changes is the loss of ambient humidity both indoors and out. As the heaters come on, humidity drops below 60%. At this level, water loss from the skin occurs at a much faster rate. Normally the skin's outermost layer, along with the help of naturally produced oils, attempt to combat this loss. They provide an impermeable barrier that protects the skin from harmful irritants, but also provide a seal which prevents water from evaporating and leaving the skin. Elderly patients who produce less natural oil are particularly at risk for drying skin and water loss. But winter skin doesn't have to take hold this time of year. A few simple measures can help prevent this problem.

Some common practices can actually aggravate symptoms of winter skin. Hot showers and hot tubs, while feeling good temporarily, impart a lot of heat energy which leads to evaporation and further drying. The use of soap, which is designed to remove dirt and oils, can often strip natural oils from the skin. With this barrier element gone, minor irritants can cause major discomfort. Harsh soaps with fragrances, dyes and anti-bacterial agents should be avoided. Even mild soaps should be used only where needed, while simply rinsing other areas. Acne medications such as Retin A and salicylic acid will likely cause excessive dryness. The frequency of these medications may have to be reduced during winter months.



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Moisturizers play a large role in combating the effects of winter skin. A good moisturizer doesn't add water back, it recreates the skin barrier and seals in moisture. Moisturizers applied in the first three minutes after showering do the best job of sealing in moisture. After three minutes, water evaporates and leaves the skin dry and itchy. Use thin cotton gloves under rubber gloves for work or household activities where hand wetting is anticipated. Always moisturize after hand washing. Heavier moisturizers work better for very dry areas,

especially ones that are scooped from a jar rather than pumped from a bottle. Ingredients such as petrolatum, ceramides, mineral oil, linoleic acid, dimethicone and glycerin are good. Humidifiers are also a good idea to help add moisture back to the skin.

In those prone to sensitive skin, eczema and psoriasis, dry winter weather often causes the skin to progress to the red, cracking, inflamed skin of an eczema or psoriasis flare. These conditions can be severe and disabling, limiting productivity at work and daily activities at home. For this, topical and sometimes oral medications prescribed by a dermatologist will help reverse inflammation and itch, allowing skin to heal. Once under control, abiding by the above skin care tips will help reduce the frequency and severity of flares.

If you develop dryness not cured by these simple tips or think you have symptoms of eczema or psoriasis, a trip to your dermatologist to develop a personalized treatment regimen can help bring the joy back to the winter season.