



Managing dry skin in the pharmacy

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Dry skin is extremely common, and many people may suffer from dry skin at some stage in their lives, some more than others. It may be a temporary problem, only affecting some people in winter for example, or it could be a lifelong condition. Dry skin also varies in its severity affecting some people to such a degree that they will need therapeutic intervention which can range from a simple moisturising cream to topical and oral prescription medications.

Dry skin can be caused by:

- Age – it is more common in older adults
- Lifestyle habits – taking long hot baths or showers, air-conditioning and exposure to hot dry climates, having a job or hobby that exposes the skin to possible irritants
- Certain skin diseases, such as eczema, which may present with varying degrees of dry skin

Dry skin can cause a feeling of skin tightness, skin that looks and feels rough, itches, flakes, has fine lines or cracks and even redness. Left untreated, dry skin can even develop deep cracks that may bleed or become infected.

Lifestyle and home remedies include:

- Taking shorter baths or showers with warm, and not hot, water
- Using mild cleansers and avoiding excessive skin washing – using an emollient, such as emulsifying ointment, or soap-free cleansers as soap substitutes
- Using a soluble bath oil in the bath
- Gently patting or blotting (not rubbing) the skin when towelling dry

- Moisturising with richer creams and ointments, especially after a bath or shower and avoiding lotions that contain alcohol
- Wearing natural fabrics that allow the skin to breathe
- Using fragrance-free laundry detergents and softeners
- Minimising the use of heaters and air-conditioners or, alternatively, using a humidifier
- Avoiding climates with extreme temperatures
- Drinking plenty of water

Which moisturisers to use

The first step in combating dry skin is using skin moisturisers that rehydrate the top layer of skin cells and seal in the moisture to help keep the skin soft and supple. The best time to apply these is after bathing or washing hands while the skin is still damp. In most cases, using a combination of different types of moisturisers consistently gives good results.

• The moisture absorbers – humectants

These draw water to the skin by bonding with water molecules thereby increasing the moisture in the skin. They are a good first line of defence against dry skin and are suitable for most skin types.

Key ingredients are – glycerine, lactic acid, urea, hyaluronic acid and alpha-hydroxy acids.

• The space fillers – emollients

An emollient is a fat/oil that acts as a moisturiser by filling in gaps in dry skin, making it smooth and better hydrated. They work best for extremely dry, dehydrated skin.

Key ingredients are – lanolin, mineral oil and petrolatum.

• The skin glue – ceramides

These are lipids found naturally in skin, that help form the skin's barrier and help the skin retain moisture.

Key ingredient – ceramides.

- **The moisture sealers – occlusives**

These form a hydrophobic film to physically prevent moisture loss. Some humectants and emollients also act as an occlusive/barrier.

Natural remedies that are also useful

- Sunflower seed oil used as a moisturiser
- Coconut oil is as effective as petroleum jelly for treating dry skin
- Oatmeal bath – adding powdered oatmeal to the bath or using creams that contain oatmeal
- Honey
- Petroleum jelly improves the skin barrier especially when dry skin is caused by ageing
- Aloe Vera

There are more serious conditions that can cause dry skin such as psoriasis, hypothyroidism and diabetes. A doctor will be better able to prescribe treatment for those patients.

It is good to remember that the best treatment of dry skin in any form is always prevention.

References

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