



Dry skin

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Introduction

The skin is the largest organ in the body, and when it does not retain a sufficient amount of moisture, it becomes dry.

Dry skin, unless it is an inherited disorder or is caused by another condition, is called xeroderma.

Dry skin is an uncomfortable condition causing the skin to become irritated and itchy. The skin may at times slough off in small flakes and scales. Scaling most often affects the lower legs. Rubbing or scratching dry skin can lead to infection and scarring.

What causes skin to become dry?

Normal skin is soft and pliable in texture due to its water content. To help protect against water loss, the epidermis or outer layer of skin contains oil, which slows water evaporation and holds moisture in the deeper layers of skin. If this oil is depleted, the skin becomes dry. Certain factors can increase the risk of developing dry skin, including (but not limited to):

- Ageing causes pores to produce less oil; therefore, older people are more likely to develop dry skin.
- Cold, dry weather.
- Using very hot water when bathing or showering.
- Bathing too frequently, particularly if using harsh soaps.

Some people, however, may naturally have dry skin.

Tips for relieving dry skin

• Seal in the moisture

It is advised to moisturise the skin to rehydrate the top layer of skin cells and seal in moisture. Skin moisturisers usually contain:

- Humectants, which help attract moisture. These include ingredients such as ceramides, glycerin, sorbitol, hyaluronic acid, and lecithin.
- Petroleum jelly, silicone, lanolin, and mineral oil which help seal moisture within the skin.

- Emollients, such as linoleic and lauric acids, smoothen skin by filling in the spaces between skin cells.

In general, the thicker and greasier a moisturiser, the more effective it is said to be. Petroleum jelly and moisturising oils such as mineral oil, although inexpensive, are often found to be most effective in relieving dry skin. This is because they contain no water and work best to seal in moisture if used while the skin is still damp after a bath or washing hands. Other moisturisers containing water and oil are often more cosmetically appealing than petroleum jelly or oils because they are less greasy.

• Use gentle, fragrance-free skin care products

Some skin care products, such as deodorant soaps, are too harsh for dry, sensitive skins. Look for products that are labelled “fragrance-free”. Be cautious of “unscented” products as these may contain chemicals that can irritate dry, sensitive skin. Products containing alcohol, alpha-hydroxy acid, fragrance and retinoids can exacerbate dry skin by removing natural oils from the skin.

• Add moisture to the air

A humidifier can be used to increase the moisture levels in the air, especially in cold, dry weather.

• Avoid bathing or washing with very hot water

Dry hands, a side effect from preventing COVID-19

Since the dawn of the COVID-19 pandemic, it has been ingrained in our minds to wash and/or sanitise our hands frequently. While this is one of the most important measures in preventing the spread of COVID-19 and other viruses and bacteria, frequent washing and sanitising of hands has left many, if not, most people suffering from dry, cracked skin.

Moisturising the skin, particularly after washing or sanitising will help keep skin hydrated. Dermatologists have recommended using a hand cream or ointment that:

- contains mineral oil or petroleum jelly,
- comes in a tube, rather than a pump bottle, and
- is fragrance-free.

When using sanitiser, allow it to dry before applying hand cream or ointment.

Conclusion

Dry skin is common and can affect people of all ages, especially older people. Since itching is a common symptom of having dry skin, patients must be advised against scratching and instead opt to moisturise to alleviate the itch. Choosing the right type of moisturiser is an important intervention in relieving the discomfort of dry skin. Frequent washing or sanitising of hands is still recommended to remove harmful bacteria and viruses. However, to alleviate dry skin, always moisturise after washing your hands to keep the skin hydrated.

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