



Caring for your skin when winter weather hits

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Introduction

The cold is coming and stepping between warm, heated areas indoors and cold, dry conditions outside can take a toll on the skin. Warm clothes with a rough texture, especially wool or flannel, can rub on the skin and aggravate symptoms. In addition to causing skin conditions such as dry lips and skin or cracked heels, winter weather can also cause other skin conditions such as eczema, psoriasis, and rosacea to flare up. This article will provide some guidance on prevention and treatment to relieve the dry, itchy symptoms often associated with these conditions.

Dry lips

The skin on the lips is thinner and more delicate than normal skin, does not contain oil glands and dries out ten times faster than other parts of the skin. The enzymes in saliva that help to digest food can be irritating to the lips and when patients lick their lips, this, together with the evaporation of the saliva, worsens dry lips. Counsel patients not to lick their lips and not to rub, brush or bite flaking or peeling lips. Use a non-irritating heavy ointment-based balm first thing in the morning, last thing at night and at least 6–8 times during the day. Advise patients to use a lip balm that contains sunscreen during the day to prevent the lips from getting sunburnt. It may be helpful to keep several tubes of lip balm in different places to allow easy access and application throughout the day. Be sure to take in sufficient amounts of liquids to stay hydrated. The use of humidifiers at home can also reduce the risk of dry lips.

It is important to treat dry, chapped lips as soon as possible to prevent secondary infection. Patients should see a doctor if their condition persists after 2–3 weeks of treatment to exclude

other possible conditions like cheilitis or cancers that may need pharmacological treatment.

Cracked heels

Dry skin can also result in painful cracked heels, especially in winter. Having calluses can complicate the problem and make walking painful and difficult. Cracked heels may be treated by applying petroleum jelly at night and covering the heels with cling wrap and a pair of socks before going to bed.

Winter itch

Winter itch occurs when the skin dries out so much that it becomes uncomfortable and itchy. It is seen more frequently in the elderly with dry skin. Itching usually presents in autumn and winter and clears up during the summer months. Clothes, especially wool and flannel clothing, can aggravate symptoms around the knees, inner thighs, and ankles. Symptoms are often worse at night or when changing clothes. Winter itch does not cause a rash, but the skin appears slightly dry. Scratching can irritate the skin and may result in torn and broken hair shafts and/or secondary infection of hair follicles due to constant scratching.

Taking a warm bath before going to sleep can relieve symptoms. Some patients find that adding a quarter cup of baking soda (sodium bicarbonate) to a full bath provides relief. Applying a moisturising cream directly after bathing and whenever the skin feels dry or itchy is also recommended. Capsaicin cream can be useful to relieve symptoms in localised areas with persistent itch. It is preferable to wear several layers of lightweight clothing such as silk, linen or muslin that can be added or removed when moving to colder or warmer areas. Winter itch can last for a few days or weeks and occasionally throughout winter and usually resolves after the winter months.

Cold urticaria

Some people experience an allergic reaction to cold weather or cold water and develop hives shortly after exposure that resolves within

a couple of hours. Antihistamine creams can help, but it is best to avoid exposure to prevent hives.

Chilblains

Repeated exposure to the cold can result in inflammation of the small blood vessels that can cause burning, itching, red patches, swelling and blistering on the hands and feet. These can be prevented by preventing exposure to the cold and applying moisturisers to ease and resolve symptoms. They usually resolve within one to three weeks but can also become infected if not treated in time.

Eczema

Dermatitis and eczema are both associated with dry, scaly, red skin that itches and burns and can easily be exacerbated by the drying effects of winter weather. Areas commonly affected include the back of the neck, elbow creases and the backs of the knees. Sweating and overheating can also trigger itching and scratching, emphasising the need to wear several layers of clothes that can be removed when necessary to prevent overheating.

Raynaud's disease

When patients with Raynaud's disease are exposed to the cold, blood vessels in the extremities (e. g. fingers and toes) constrict, resulting in circulation problems. The affected areas become extremely pale, and if exposure continues for too long, the areas can turn a deep purple colour due to the lack of oxygen. When the areas finally warm up, it becomes red, swollen, and tingly. These patients need to wear sufficient warm protective clothing such as gloves, thick socks, and insulated shoes if they are going to be outside for long periods of time.

Psoriasis

Psoriasis is a condition that occurs when the skin produces too many skin cells. This results in dry, flaky, scaly patches on the skin that start as a collection of small red bumps on the skin. Psoriasis most commonly occurs on the scalp, elbows, knees, hands, and feet. Dry air, cold weather and lack of sunlight can make this condition worse. Short, lukewarm showers followed by applying moisturisers and products containing vitamin A, vitamin D, coal tar and cortisone can help alleviate symptoms.

Rosacea

Rosacea is a bacterial infection that causes flushing and reddening of the face, and patients often look and feel as though they are blushing. Some patients can also develop bumps and pustules or dry eyes and eyelids along with the redness. Extreme weather, including cold weather, can exacerbate these symptoms.

General recommendations to alleviate dry skin

The following tips can assist in alleviating dry skin:

- Ensure sufficient intake of fluids to keep hydrated.
- Heating can dry out the air and should be used sparingly – this can also be counteracted by using a humidifier.
- Taking short, lukewarm showers is preferable to a long hot bath or shower.

- Avoid harsh soaps that contain alcohol, parabens, synthetic dyes, or fragrances and rather use non-foaming cleansers and body washes that contain nourishing oils.
- Apply fragrance-free moisturisers or creams directly after a bath or shower (to lock in moisture) and frequently throughout the day as necessary. Choosing a moisturiser containing urea (Table I), dimethicone, glycerine, lanolin or mineral oil can benefit dry skin.
- Coconut oil compounds, safflower oil, avocado oils or mineral oil (baby oil) are ideal for soothing and nourishing dry, irritated, or damaged skin.

Table I: Some examples of urea containing products available in South Africa

Product	Urea concentration
Eucerin® UreaRepair Plus	5%
Eulactol® heel balm	25%
Nutraplus®	10%
Epizone® Plus	10%

Conclusion

Harsh and cold conditions can dry the skin during winter and exacerbate several skin conditions. Avoiding prolonged exposure and wearing warm protective clothing when outside can reduce the risks. Keeping the skin hydrated and frequently applying moisturisers can alleviate the symptoms associated with dry, irritated skin. Patients should contact a doctor if any of the symptoms do not resolve or get worse despite treatment at home.

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