

Dry and Itchy Skin

Dry skin occurs when skin doesn't retain sufficient moisture. This can happen as a result of frequent bathing, use of harsh soaps, aging, or certain medical conditions. And for those in colder climates, it can stem from cold, dry winter air.

Wintertime can bring red, rough, raw, and itchy skin. This is because cold winter air means low humidity, both outdoors and indoors. The water content of the epidermis (the outermost layer of skin) tends to reflect the level of humidity around it. Fortunately, there are many simple and inexpensive things you can do to relieve winter dry skin, also known as winter itch or winter xerosis.

Reduce symptoms with:

- Shampoos with menthol or eucalyptus
- Aveeno oatmeal bath (use as directed)
- Sarna Lotion for itching (use as directed, www.sarna-skincare.com)
- Drink plenty of water

Protect your skin from the elements with:

- Hypoallergenic moisturizing face and body lotions
- Sunscreen
- Protective clothing
- Avoid harsh soaps, laundry detergents and other chemicals. Choose moisturizing preparations such as Dove, Olay, and Basis, or consider soap-free cleansers like Cetaphil, Oilatum-AD, and Aquanil. Steer clear of deodorant soaps, perfumed soaps, and alcohol products, which can strip away natural oils.
- Avoid extreme temperatures
- Don't wear irritating clothing like wool and synthetic fabrics

- Use a humidifier in the winter. Set it to around 60%

What can you do?

- Limit yourself to one 5- to 10-minute bath or shower daily. If you bathe more than that, you may strip away much of the skin's oily layer and cause it to lose moisture. Use lukewarm rather than hot water, which can wash away natural oils.
- To avoid damaging the skin, stay away from bath sponges, scrub brushes, and washcloths. If you don't want to give them up altogether, be sure to use a light touch. For the same reason, pat or blot (don't rub) the skin when towel-drying.
- Apply moisturizer immediately after bathing or washing your hands. This helps plug the spaces between your skin cells and seal in moisture while your skin is still damp.
- Never scratch. Most of the time, a moisturizer can control the itch. You can also use a cold pack or compress to relieve itchy spots.
- Use fragrance-free laundry detergents and avoid fabric softeners.

Dry skin is usually not a serious health problem, but it can produce serious complications, such as chronic eczema (red patches) or bleeding from fissures that have become deep enough to disrupt capillaries in the dermis. Another possible complication is secondary bacterial infection (redness, swelling, and pus), which may require antibiotics. (Rarely, dry skin is associated with allergy.)

Consult your clinician if you notice any of these symptoms or if measures you take at home provide no relief. For severe dry skin, your clinician may prescribe a cream containing lactic acid, urea, or corticosteroids. She or he

may also want to rule out medical conditions that can cause dry skin, including hypothyroidism, diabetes, lymphoma, kidney disease, liver disease, psoriasis, and atopic dermatitis. Always use sunscreen — even in the winter — to protect your skin.

—Chris Aiken, MD, updated 7/1/2025