



1025 N. Main, Layton, Utah 84041

544-4333

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Beat the Itch of Winter Skin

Unless you live in a tropical paradise, the dryness, cold, and wind of winter can wreak havoc on your skin. But that doesn't mean you have to suffer from cracked, parched skin -- as long as you arm yourself with the right tools.

From simple dry, cracked skin to eczema, psoriasis, and seborrheic dermatitis, the cold, wind, and low humidity of winter can worsen just about every kind of skin condition.

"A vicious cycle develops," says Ella L. Toombs, MD, a board-certified dermatologist and director of Aesthetic Dermatology of Dupont Circle, in Washington, D.C.

The dry air of winter pulls moisture from the skin, which then tends to peel, crack, and shed excessively, Toombs says. This increased loss of skin cells results in increased oil and water loss. This leads to more dry skin. Also, the forced hot air of indoor heating systems contributes substantially.

"Remember going on vacation to a warm tropical climate and how smooth the skin felt without any moisturizer?" she says. "That's because the humidity in the atmosphere kept the naturally produced oils on the skin and the superficial cells soft and adherent so that oils were not lost."

For people who have an existing "skin condition, such as eczema, psoriasis, rosacea, or dandruff, winter weather can make a bad problem worse," says Bruce Katz, MD, a private practice dermatologist and director of the JUVA Skin and Laser Center in New York City. "But many of the winter protection strategies we suggest to patients who have skin conditions also apply to everyone else."

Treating Skin Conditions

Eczema is an overall skin sensitivity that appears as a rash, says Katz. People with eczema should not wear wool or heavy synthetic fabrics directly on their skin. These can cause irritation from too much friction.

"Cover up and avoid wind and cold," says Katz, "But wear a cotton layer against your skin to protect against friction."

In **psoriasis**, skin cells overproduce themselves at five times the normal rate, forming scaly patching or plaque, says Thomas Russell, MD, clinical professor of dermatology at the Medical College of Wisconsin. It's harder for skin to retain moisture because there's less humidity in the air during winter, so tiny cracks can develop on the skin. To help keep skin moist, use a moisturizer, and watch how many times you bathe.

"We take too many showers at too hot a temperature in the winter months," says Russell. "Most people, especially the elderly, in winter should bathe once a week. You can wash where you need to for personal hygiene at a sink. And take a bath rather than a shower because a bath allows the skin to hold on to more water."

Toombs agrees. "Use soap only in areas where you perspire," she says. "When you shower, use warm, not hot, water, and do not use a washcloth because it may be too abrasive."

Russell also points out that people who have psoriasis need to be especially cautious about contracting strep throat, which usually strikes in winter months.

"A strep infection will cause psoriasis to flare badly," he says. "If you hear about a strep outbreak in your child's school or in some other group setting, it is wise to pay attention for any symptoms of strep and see your doctor if you feel you might be getting it."

Seborrheic dermatitis, or severe dandruff, can worsen significantly in cold, dry weather.

"With seborrhea, it's like walking on a tightrope in the winter," says Russell. "You don't want to dry the skin with frequent shampooing, but you also need to apply medications, some of which come as shampoo."

Russell says that when seborrheic dermatitis or any other condition worsens in winter, then it's time to visit a dermatologist.

Prevent Dry Skin

Dealing with dry skin is all about trapping moisture in your skin.

"For dry, chapped hands with cracked cuticles, I recommend an old standby, Corn Huskers Lotion," says Claire McArdle, RN, president of Beauty Therapies in Brookline, Mass. "It's very soothing and easily absorbed into the skin. I've used it for years on my clients, and I've never found anything better."

Moisturizing after a bath or shower is also important.

"When drying after bath or shower, pat dry -- don't rub," says Toombs. "Rubbing will remove the skin cells and oils you've just applied. Immediately after patting dry, apply a quality cream- or ointment-based moisturizer."

She also suggests moisturizing fingernails and cuticles as nails love moisture and can dry out and break more easily in the winter.

One of the best wintertime medicines for these skin conditions is the one that is often the most difficult to arrange: a long vacation in a warm, humid climate.

"A few weeks in the Caribbean with lots of swimming and sunshine often seems to be helpful," says Russell. "All that water and warmth is the best treatment for many people."

But don't overdo it in the sun -- sunblock with at least an SPF of 15 helps protect you from the sun's damaging effects while allowing you to enjoy your tropical paradise.