

How to stop dry skin ruining your winter

Many of us suffer from a bit of dry skin from time to time and the problem can often get worse during winter when we're exposed to more extreme temperatures as well as the drying effects of central heating. So what might be causing your dry skin, and what's the best way to treat the condition?

Rather than assuming our dry skin is being caused by turning the thermostat a little too high, it's important first to consider what else might be causing the problem.

"Dry skin can have a number of causes," explains Dr Adam Friedmann, consultant dermatologist at The Harley Street Dermatology Clinic.

"The problem can be related to age, or our working environment or may be the result of a disease," he adds.

Skin conditions

Many of us think of conditions such as [eczema](#) as something that first occurs during childhood. However, it's possible to develop the condition - which causes irritation, redness and dry skin - later in life. In fact, if there's a disease causing your dry skin, it's the most likely culprit.

"The most common form of disease causing dry skin is eczema," agrees Friedmann. "Other causes might be [psoriasis](#), [lichen planus](#) or lichen simplex. These are basically all inflammatory skin diseases that can leave your skin a bit (or in some cases very) dry."

Environmental factors

As well as central heating, many things in our environment can cause skin problems. And it can be hard to discover the cause.

"If your doctor has ruled out skin diseases and there are no other telltale symptoms, you would probably benefit from [allergy testing](#) - patch tests to pick up allergies to fragrances or preservatives that you may be coming into contact with," explains Friedmann. "If you do discover such an allergy, then avoiding the trigger should sort the problem out."

However, patch testing is rarely available on the NHS unless you have very severe skin problems and it may be harder to establish other environmental triggers.

"The environment can be difficult to control," explains Friedmann. "You might find that heaters, water softeners or other environmental issues are OK for some people but not for others. Experimenting with eliminating various things may help you to discover the cause."

Dietary problems

We're always told that what we eat can show on our skin - but can poor diet cause dry skin?

"Whilst in extreme cases, you might find skin problems accompanying severe vitamin deficiency, this would only come about with an incredibly poor diet," explains Friedmann. "In reality, your diet is unlikely to be the cause, unless you have a low-grade allergy to something you are consuming."

In addition, whilst it may feel that being dehydrated could cause problems with dry skin, this is also unlikely.

"Dehydration isn't normally involved in dry skin," explains Dr Anton Alexandroff, consultant dermatologist and spokesperson for the [British Skin Foundation](#). "It's more about moisture of the outer skin."

When to see a doctor

A small amount of dry skin may clear up in a few days and not recur. If it's not too severe, your local pharmacist may be able to help with diagnosis and treatment. But if you're concerned about your skin, it's time to give your GP a call.

"It's a good idea to see your doctor if you're worried about dry skin," agrees Alexandroff. "This is especially important if you also have redness, inflammation or [itching](#)."

Your GP will be able to help diagnose your condition and may refer you to a dermatologist for further investigation.

Caring for dry skin

If you're not suffering from an allergy or specific skin disease, the best way to treat your dry skin and prevent further dryness is through regular moisturising.

"Moisturisers are the first line of treatment," explains Alexandroff. "You can choose between creams, ointment or gel. The greasier it is, the more efficient it is. Whilst ointments may be too greasy for some people's taste, the benefit is that you don't need to apply as much, or as frequently."

However, you need to choose your moisturiser wisely, as some ingredients may exacerbate existing problems.

"Most dermatologists would recommend you avoid fragrances and plant extracts, such as tea tree oil, which may irritate the skin. Instead, we'd suggest you use simple moisturisers such as Vaseline or E45 cream," explains Friedmann.

"It's also a good idea to wash with moisturiser instead of soap. Most dermatologists will recommend that you wash with aqueous cream – a moisturiser that doesn't contain any irritants – as soap can often make the problem worse."

GPs are now advised by the NHS not to prescribe soap substitutes and moisturisers except in severe cases. But aqueous cream and a wide variety of moisturisers are available from pharmacists.

Can I over-moisturise?

When it comes to moisturising, it's hard to know exactly how often to do it.

"You should moisturise at least once a day," recommends Alexandroff. "Especially during the winter."

"Unless you're someone who gets a reaction to moisturiser – such as an acne sufferer who may find it clogs their pores a little – it's impossible to over-moisturise," agrees Friedmann.

Whilst dry skin can be irritating, with the right care you can keep the problem in check this winter.

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