

Dry Skin

Dry skin afflicts many people. It can be annoying because of its rough, scaly appearance, and it can cause severe itching. In dark-skinned individuals, 'chapping' can cause vague areas of decreased pigment (light color). This is particularly common on the face in children. After puberty, heavy oil production on the face usually corrects that dryness. Adults usually find that their legs and arms are the driest areas; the tendency to dryness increases in the elderly.

Warm, humid weather will usually completely control dry skin. Hot, dry weather is moderately drying to the skin, but the most drying occurs in cold climates. When cold air is heated in buildings, its humidity drops drastically, drawing water from the skin, lips, and nasal membranes, and from plants and wood (doors become loose in their frames). It is difficult to make such indoor air humid again; gallons of water must be added (by a central humidifier on the furnace) to each room each day. Putting open pans of water on the radiators is useless.

The only ways to treat dry skin are to avoid removing normal skin oils, and to add oil (lubrication) to the skin. Putting water on the skin is actually drying because water leaches oils out the natural skin which keep the skin soft and smooth. Soaps and detergents leach oil out even more. Bathing thus can result in 'dishpan body', with dry, rough skin. In dry weather, bathe only once a day or less, and avoid long, hot baths or showers with lots of soap. Oiled or superfatted soaps are probably less drying than regular and deodorant bath soaps.

After bathing, and at other times if necessary, apply a lubricant to dry skin areas. Lotions are pleasant to use, but contain a lot of water and little oil, so usually are not adequate for lubrication. However, for those people with only mildly dry skin, using a lotion like Vaseline Intensive Care is quite effective; Lubriderm lotion is another good lotion for mildly dry skin.

Oils, such as mineral oil, bath oil, or vegetable oil (such as olive oil) are good lubricants, and are pleasant to use if applied lightly. Use caution in adding oils to the bath. They provide less lubrication to the skin and make the tub very slippery. Creams and ointments are good lubricants but are more difficult to apply. Eucerin cream is a very effective moisturizing cream available in most large grocery stores and pharmacies. Creams and lotions containing urea (like Ultra Mide 25 lotion, Aquacare lotion, and Carmol 20 cream) are commonly used as lubricants and work well, but they may temporarily cause a burning sensation on dry, cracked skin. All lubricants are best applied immediately after bathing and toweling; there is no advantage to applying to wet skin before toweling.

Certain myths about dry skin should be laid to rest. Dryness of the skin does not lead to permanent wrinkling, and lubricants (moisturizing creams) will not prevent wrinkling. Dryness occurs only on the top, dead skin layer, and is seen as fine lines. The dead skin layer is constantly shed and renewed, so no surface dryness lines are permanent. Wrinkles are due mostly to sun exposure (which damages deeper skin layers) and aging. Another myth is that diet affects dry skin. It does not. Short of starvation, the skin's oil glands make the same quantity and type of oil regardless of diet, and eating less or more oil has no impact on them.

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