

Dry Skin: Stop the Itch-Scratch Cycle

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You don't need an expert to tell you if your skin is dry. Look for rough, scaly patches on your legs, back, arms or waist. They're the areas that you forget about in your concentration on moisturizing your face and hands, and they can itch. You might scratch. "I often see scratch lines on people," says Dee Anna Glaser, M.D., assistant professor of dermatology at St. Louis University School of Medicine. A few even draw blood. Scratch too much, and an itchy patch can get infected or result in a permanent scar.

AHHH, RELIEF!

No need for things to get that dire, says Mary Lupo, M.D., associate clinical professor of dermatology at Tulane University School of Medicine in New Orleans. "There's so much that women can do for dry skin--more so than for oily skin. A whole new generation of moisturizers and skin products are available to help dry skin, so it really needn't be a problem anymore."

Some golden oldies still work, too. Here's what women doctors advise.

Milk it down. If your itchy winter skin is driving you nuts, "go to the refrigerator and get a quart of milk. Pour it into a bowl or basin. Dip a washcloth or a piece of gauze in the cold milk and apply it to your skin for five minutes," says Susan C. Taylor, M.D., assistant clinical professor of medicine in the Department of Dermatology at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine in Philadelphia. "Milk has anti-inflammatory properties that often take the itch away. It stops the vicious itch-scratch cycle."

"Milk is very soothing to the skin," says Karen S. Harkaway, M.D., clinical instructor of dermatology at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine and a dermatologist at Pennsylvania Hospital, both in Philadelphia. "Some milk contains lactic acid, which is beneficial to skin."

Grease up. For dry, itchy skin the best moisturizer is one that's thick and heavy. "Watery, scented lotions are next to useless for dry skin," says Diane L. Kallgren, M.D., a dermatologist in private practice in Boulder, Colorado. "I recommend pretty strong, thick creams or emollients. The least expensive is petroleum jelly."

Petroleum jelly may be too thick and greasy for some women. "If so, warm it up in your hands first--then it will spread easier," says Dr. Taylor. If you find petroleum jelly messy, use it at night when you're in bed.

Moisturize while damp. The best time of all to oil or cream your face and body is after a bath or shower, while you're still damp and your skin is plump with moisture, says Dr. Glaser. Moisturizing lotions are formulated to lock in moisture so that it doesn't evaporate.

Take the overnight cure. This overnight treatment from Dr. Glaser "will make your dry skin feel markedly different when you wake up the next morning," she says.

"First, soak in a lukewarm tub almost to the point where your fingers shrivel up like prunes--your skin will be fully hydrated. Get out of the tub and pat yourself semidry, then apply a layer of oil. It doesn't have to be an elegant, expensive oil--Crisco shortening is one of the very best, because it is solid, and you can slather on a thick layer. Then put on your pajamas and get into bed."

It's a little messy, so use old pajamas and sheets. "Do this when your skin is very dry," she says. "You'll feel a difference."

Grease and seal super-dry spots. Often the very driest of dry skin occurs on your heels, hands and elbows. But you can seal them with grease, too, says Dr. Glaser. Wear gloves to bed over greased-up raw, sore hands. Wear socks over your cracked heels. And wear a long-sleeved pajama top or T-shirt with snugly fitting sleeves over chapped elbows.

SKIN STRATEGIES TO TRY

Once you've salvaged your scratchy skin, keep it soft with these techniques.

What Women Doctors Do

Forming a Habit

Susan C. Taylor, M.D.

Philadelphia isn't Fairbanks, Alaska, but its winters are mighty harsh on skin, nonetheless. Susan C. Taylor, M.D., assistant clinical professor of medicine in the Department of Dermatology at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine in Philadelphia takes these steps to protect her skin.

"As a mainstay, I apply moisturizer twice daily: in the morning after a shower and at night when I take my clothes off at the end of the day. That's when you feel most itchy, so it's a good time to reapply moisturizer.

"There's not a day in my life when I don't apply moisturizer after a shower. It's the optimum time to apply lotion, because it locks in the moisture from the shower,

and it can make a big difference.

"Make moisturizing a habit, like applying deodorants," she says. The improvement motivates her to stick with her post-shower routine. "I also use a heavier moisturizer in the middle of winter, when the air is so dry."

Aim for an AHA. When it comes to preventing dry skin, women doctors rave about moisturizers with alpha hydroxy acids (AHAs), originally derived from milk, fruit or sugarcane. AHA moisturizers do double duty. "They remove dry, dead, crusty, scaly skin and they trap moisture in your skin," says Dr. Taylor.

"Some over-the-counter AHA products are better than others," says Dr. Harkaway. "In general, the thicker the moisturizer, the better."

Bathe or shower with tepid water and mild soap. The water temperature should be lukewarm, says Dr. Harkaway. "Use a very mild soap--like Dove, Lever 2000, Tone or Caress. If your skin is dry, stay away from strong antibacterial soaps," she says.