

Preventing Dry Skin
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Living Well
A column from SVNA by Cyd Emmons

Once the lights and good cheer of the holidays are done with, we enter the real depths of winter in these parts. Along with bone-chilling cold and the ever present risk of slipping and falling on slick walkways, winter often brings yet another unpleasant side effect: dry skin.

“Skin is the first line of defense against infection,” said Patricia M. Tremblay, R.N., M.S, Executive Director of Salisbury Visiting Nurse Association, “so extreme itching or flaking, redness, cracking or open sores need medical attention.”

What we’re discussing here, though, is the seasonal dry skin that most of us contend with once we get into heating season. Whether by means of central heating, a woodstove or fireplace, the warmth we crave at this time of year ends up doing a number on our skin. The cold air outside and the very dry air inside can leave our skin looking and feeling rough, wrinkly and dry, just begging for moisture.

“Winter skin usually responds well to a little T.L.C.,” Tremblay said, “and a few minor changes in lifestyle.” And attending to dry skin is not just about making you more comfortable, she warns. “If not cared for, severe dry skin can lead to dermatitis and other complications.”

Simple Changes Can Help

- Although every fiber of your being is telling you how good it would feel to stand under a steaming shower or soak in a hot tub, your skin will pay a price for it. Hot water strips oils from the skin and a long shower or bath simply compounds the effect. So switch to warm water and be quick about it.
 - There are many moisturizing soaps available today, so choose one that is mild and has added oils. Avoid harsh soaps, particularly deodorant or antibacterial types, containing detergents that can further dry out your tender skin.
 - Moisturizers can help seal water in your skin, although you should avoid those that contain fragrance, which can be irritating. Moisturizers don’t have to be expensive to be effective. A particular favorite of Tremblay’s is Eucerin, an oil-based moisturizer, preferably the cream that comes in a jar rather than the lotion version.

“What many people don’t know is that, to be effective, a moisturizer should be applied while the skin is still damp,” she said. “Pat or blot your skin lightly, rather than toweling off, and then get the moisturizer on right away.”
- On the topic of moisturizing Tremblay has another tip for those who still wash dishes by hand. Slather on moisturizer, then put on rubber gloves. The heat of the dishwater will open your pores and help the moisturizer soak in.

And do give your hands, which bear the brunt of exposure, special attention. Take a moment to moisturize each time you wash your hands—which you’re undoubtedly doing very frequently to avoid the flu, right? If you’re going to be spending more than a few minutes outside, moisturize your hands first.

- Our oil-producing glands are less active as we age. An oil-based moisturizer, with lactic or alpha hydroxy acids in a petrolatum base, will help keep older skin soft and hydrated.
- Pamper yourself by wearing soft, natural fabrics that allow your skin to breathe. Wool can be irritating to sensitive skin, so wear a shirt or turtleneck underneath.
- Choose one of the many laundry detergents and fabric softeners available today that are free of fragrance and dyes, both of which can be irritating to skin. If your washer has an extra rinse option, it will help remove all detergent residue.
- Consider buying a portable humidifier. Be aware, however, that humidifiers can cause more harm than good if a rigorous maintenance schedule isn’t followed. The water must be changed frequently and the humidifier should be completely cleaned at least twice a week to avoid becoming a petri dish for bacteria and mold. If anyone in your family has asthma or allergies, consult your doctor before using a humidifier as high humidity can worsen symptoms.
- Placing pans of water on top of the woodstove or on forced hot air vents is a simple way to add a little more moisture to the air. As with a humidifier, change the water daily.