

Understanding dry skin: causes, care, and what to look for in your skincare routine

Dry skin is characterised by a tight, itchy, or burning feeling after washing, scaly patches, or skin that looks dull and rough.¹ Dry skin can be more than just a minor irritation - it can impact your comfort and confidence.^{1,2} The good news is that it's manageable with the right care and products.³

What is dry skin?

Dry skin, or *xerosis*, happens when the skin barrier is compromised and causes the loss of moisture from the top layer of skin known as the stratum corneum (SC).² When healthy, the SC forms an effective barrier which prevents water loss, protects against harmful irritants, and ensures skin stays soft and pliable.² When the skin barrier is compromised, dehydration can lead to cracks, inflammation and itching.²

What causes dry skin?

Several factors can lead to dry skin, including:

- **Environmental factors**^{1,4}
Cold air; low humidity/dry indoor heat; intense exposure to sunlight.
- **Skin cleansing/washing**^{1,2,4}
Frequent long hot showers or baths; use of soap products that are alkaline or contain harsh ingredients like **sodium lauryl sulphate (SLS)**.
- **Occupational factors/hobbies**¹
“Wet work” or frequent contact with harsh chemicals at work, e.g., hairdressers, nurses, housekeepers.
- **Aging**⁴
As we age, the skin's ability to retain moisture decreases.
- **Dry skin conditions**⁴
Such as psoriasis and atopic dermatitis (eczema).

How to manage dry skin

Managing dry skin involves **avoiding irritants, managing environmental impacts, and effectively moisturising skin** to restore skin barrier function.^{1,2,4} Here are some steps you can take to help alleviate dry skin conditions:

1. Avoid irritants and detergents

Start by switching to a **mild or SLS-free soap**, or a soap substitute such as an **emollient washing product**.^{2,4} Avoid shampoos, shower gels, bubble baths, and hand washes that contain irritants.²

2. Choose the right moisturiser

Not all moisturisers are created equal.² Avoid aqueous creams as they can weaken the dermal barrier and increase transdermal water loss.² Look for products that include a blend of emollients, humectants, and occlusives that work together to **moisturise, repair, and maintain** skin integrity and appearance.³

- **Humectants** are low molecular weight molecules such as **urea, glycerol, hyaluronic acid, sorbitol, panthenol, and propylene glycol.**³ Due to their low molecular weight, humectants can penetrate the stratum corneum where they attract water to increase skin hydration.³
- **Emollients** are long chain saturated hydrocarbons that include compounds such as **fatty acids, squalene, fatty alcohols, and cholesterol.**³ They improve skin barrier function and overall skin texture and appearance.³
- **Occlusives** are oils and wax such as **petrolatum jelly, beeswax, silicones, and zinc oxide.**³ These compounds form an inactive layer on the skin surface to help block the evaporation of water from the skin.³

3. Apply often - and at the right time

Apply moisturiser immediately after bathing when your skin has a high water content.⁴ Reapply throughout the day.⁴ If using topical flare treatment (such as topical cortisone or immunomodulators), allow for at least 30 minutes (1 hour for tacrolimus) between the application of moisturisers and flare treatments.²

4. Keep it simple and gentle

Avoid over-washing and hot baths or showers.⁴ Avoid skin products that contain fragrances and preservatives.⁴ The use of soap and harsh detergents, such as SLS, has been shown to remove skin lipids, increase the pH of the SC and damage the skin barrier, exacerbating dry skin.²

In Summary

Dry skin, when left untreated, can lead to a weakened skin barrier, inflammation and itch.² Regular use of a moisturising agent that combines emollients, humectants and occlusives can smooth, hydrate, repair, and protect your skin.³

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