

Self-care information on...

Dry skin



What is dry skin?

Dry skin is a very common condition, which can appear at any age. It usually doesn't present a serious problem but can often be associated with other medical conditions such as eczema, contact dermatitis and psoriasis.

What causes dry skin?

The skin is made up of many different layers and forms a natural barrier to protect our body from the outside environment. To help protect the outer layer of skin from losing water, the skin produces an oily substance called sebum. If the skin doesn't have enough sebum, it loses water and feels dry.

Common causes of dry skin include:

- Excessive bathing or showering, scrubbing of the skin while washing, or harsh soaps that dissolve the protective layer of sebum
- Environmental conditions that increase water loss such as very hot dry weather or central heating. Frequent exposure to wind and sun can evaporate water from the skin, making the surface feel itchy and dry
- Decreased production of sebum. This is often a factor in the elderly.

What can you do to help prevent and treat dry skin?

There are lifestyle changes that can be made which can help treat and prevent future outbreaks of dry skin.

- Stop smoking
- Drink plenty of water
- Watch the environment – dry air (low humidity) increases the risk of dry skin. Increasing humidity can help, which can be achieved by placing a damp towel on a warm radiator.
- Reduce the length of your bath or shower.
- Avoid harsh soaps and bubble baths

These lifestyle changes may help reduce the dryness of the skin but further moisturising may still be required in which case emollients (moisturisers) can be used.

Emollients

Emollients are used to soothe, hydrate and moisture the skin. They can reduce dryness, help with itching, reduce scaling and soften cracks. Emollients are applied directly to the skin and can be used frequently to help reduce water loss from the skin. They are readily available to purchase from supermarkets and pharmacies. There are various types of emollients which can help treat and prevent dry skin. If you are not sure which product(s) would be best for you speak to your local pharmacy.

Soap substitutes – can be used to replace traditional soaps. They will help lock in moisture while still providing the same level of cleanliness. Examples include emulsifying ointment. If other products are also being used then 30 minutes needs to be left between applying another product and washing with soap substitutes.

Shower gels and bath additives – Traditional shower and bath gels can cause the skin to become dry. Emollient bath and shower products will help lock in moisture while still providing the same level of cleanliness e.g. Oilatum® shower gel, Doublebase® shower gel, Hydromol® bath and shower emollient and Aveeno® bath oil.

It has been clinically proven that shower gels and bath additives provide no extra benefit compared to just applying emollients frequently- whilst often being more expensive. If you chose to use these products, care must be taken when entering and leaving the bath as these products can cause the bath to become slippery. Some bath additives contain antiseptic properties – if so they should be used on an infrequent basis unless infection is recurrent.

Creams and ointments – Creams are less greasy and absorbed quicker than ointments. This makes them easy to spread and ideal to be used in the day time. Ointments are best for very dry, thick skin. They take longer to absorb and as a result are greasier. Examples include Ultrabase®, QV®, and Zerobase® cream.

How to use emollients

Emollients should be applied frequently to help maintain moisture within the skin (always follow the manufactures instructions). Due to your hands and face being exposed to the elements more than other parts of your body, these areas may require more frequent application.

It is best to apply an emollient after you wash as this is when your body is in need of moisture and it will be readily absorbed. It will also help to create a protective barrier to help lock in the moisture.

Emollients often need to be applied even when the skin appears to be fine, this will help prevent future outbreaks of dry skin. It is important to note that emollients need to be applied generously to the skin, several times a day. Below is a table of the amount of cream or ointment needed if they were to be applied twice a day for one month. Examples include:

Area of Body	Creams or ointment
Face	60-120g
Both hands	100-200g
Both legs	400-800g
Upper body	1600g

If the skin is particularly itchy then certain creams contain extra products to help soothe the skin such as products containing crotamiton 10% e.g. Eurax® cream.

Occasionally emollients may sting when first applied, this will usually settle down after a few applications. Emollients can cause hair follicles to become blocked. One way to help reduce this is to apply the emollient in the same direction as your hair grows.

When to contact your GP practice

Most cases of simple dry skin can be treated with products readily available over the counter.

If you are unclear which treatment would be best, or if you already take medication for other conditions, your local pharmacist can advise on appropriate treatments for you or your children.

You would only need to visit your G.P if:

- Skin became cracked and was weeping or bleeding
- Skin looks or has become infected

If you need any further information:

- Ask your pharmacist
- NHS choices: www.nhs.uk
- Patient UK www.patient.co.uk

