

moisturize

Top 10 ways to soothe seriously dry skin

Dry skin can happen all year round. Here are dermatologists' top tips for preventing and treating, no matter the season.

By Bianca Mendez

If you have ever dealt with seriously dry skin you know what a battle it can be. It's uncomfortable, itchy and flaky, and you'll do just about anything to get some quick relief. With a dizzying selection of moisturizers on store shelves and seemingly endless social media hacks, it can be challenging to choose the right treatment for you. To provide tried and true advice, we asked the real skin care experts — board-certified dermatologists — for the most effective ways you can prevent and treat dry skin.

What causes dry skin

Before diving into treatment options, here's why dry skin happens: Dry skin occurs when your skin loses water. That loss results in dry, flaky skin, says Bassel Mahmoud, MD, PhD, FAAD, board-certified dermatologist and associate professor of dermatology at the University of Massachusetts.

Most people experience dry skin when the air is cold and dry, which is why it's commonly associated with winter. But dry skin can also be an issue in the summer, especially if you live in an arid climate, says Madeliene Gainers, MD, FAAD, board-certified dermatologist practicing in Chevy Chase, MD. And if you live in a more humid area, blasting your air conditioning as well as spending time in the sun and pool can also cause your skin to dry out.

Your age can be another factor when dealing with dry skin. As people get older, the epidermis and dermis begin to thin, there is

decreased collagen and elastin and the overall integrity of the skin can become compromised, adds Dr. Gainers. "There is more water evaporation from the skin's outer layer and an impaired ability to retain moisture." As you age, you might also have accumulated sun damage or get diagnosed with a disease that could affect your skin's quality.

If your skin is suddenly itchy and flaky, the cause could be something as a reaction to a new product you are using, overdoing your skin care routine or even taking a long shower.

Knowing what's causing your dry skin can help with prevention. To treat the problem, these dermatologist-backed tips will help you find relief and get your skin back on track.

Tip 1: Apply moisturizer correctly

It feels intuitive to reach for your moisturizer the minute your skin feels rough, but there's a right way to apply it. The idea of the moisturizer is that it traps the water on your skin and brings more water to your skin as well," says Dr.

Mahmoud.

Dr. Mahmoud recommends moisturizing throughout the day, but the best time to apply it is right after washing when your skin is still damp.



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That way, you're retaining the moisture that's already on your skin and the product is able to penetrate your skin better.

Another critical time to moisturize is before you go to bed. When you sleep, your skin produces less oil, so there is more water loss happening overnight, says Dr. Mahmoud. Using moisturizer will ensure that your skin is getting the hydration it needs for it to repair and heal itself.

Tip 2: Try the slugging method

Skin slugging has been a new trend as of lately to soothe dry skin, but according to Dr. Gainers, dermatologists have been recommending variations of this method for years. "For example, we often instruct patients to apply a thick cream or ointment on skin that is still damp from the shower to seal in the moisture," she says. "The whole idea behind skin slugging is to layer your regular moisturizer with a thicker product, like petroleum jelly, to maximize moisture, relieve dry skin and repair the skin barrier." However, Gainers warns that slugging should only be done occasionally. If you feel the need to use it frequently, that's a clue you may need to see your dermatologist.

Tip 3: Use an ointment or cream instead of a lotion

Not all moisturizers are created equal. Choosing the right one can make or break how your skin feels. If you're still experiencing dryness after applying moisturizer, you may need to use a thicker product. "If a person is prone to xerosis (the medical term for dry skin), products that contain more water, like lotion, are not going to be as effective as thicker options such as creams," says Dr. Gainers. If you have severely dry skin, you may want to consider an ointment. "Ointments will help to seal in the moisture," she adds.

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Tip 4: Look for "fragrance-free" products

Face and body products are often formulated with fragrances, but for some people, that may irritate and dry out the skin, says Dr. Mahmoud. Consider using products that are labeled fragrance-free because they are more gentle on the skin.

To learn whether a skin care product may cause irritation, Dr. Mahmoud suggests testing the product on one part of your skin, such as your arm. If your arm is showing signs of redness, flakiness or roughness after a few days, swap for a gentler product. You should also be mindful of harsh soaps and products that contain alcohol because they can strip the skin's oils, adds Dr. Gainers.

And lastly, be mindful of product descriptions. "Just because something says 'unscented' doesn't mean it's 'fragrance-free,'" says Dr. Mahmoud.

Tip 5: Protect yourself from the sun

"Intense ultraviolet radiation can lead to sunburns that cause the skin to be dry, red, scaly and flaky," says Dr. Gainers. This is where sun protection comes into play. Dr. Mahmoud suggests seeking shade, wearing sun-protective clothing and using a broad-spectrum, water-resistant sunscreen with an SPF of 30 or above. He also recommends using a mineral-based sunscreen if you have sensitive skin or a condition such as eczema. These sunscreens contain ingredients like zinc oxide and titanium dioxide and are gentler on the skin. Don't forget to reapply every two hours.

Now let's say you had too much fun in the sun: you accidentally get burned and now your skin is inflamed and peeling. Dr. Mahmoud suggests taking warm showers and continuing to apply moisturizer generously until the sunburn is gone. If it doesn't irritate your skin, vitamin E and aloe could help soothe burns.

Tip 6: Choose the right lip balm

A good lip balm can moisturize, but some actually can dry out your lips even more. Ingredients such as peppermint, phenol and even menthol are found in many lip balms, but for some people, these ingredients may irritate the lips, says Dr. Mahmoud. What's more, these ingredients may cause a stinging sensation, which people mistake for the product working. "When you feel the stinging sensation, it means that this product is irritating the skin, and you should stop using it," he adds. He suggests looking for a lip balm with ingredients such as petrolatum, ceramides, mineral oil, shea butter or white petroleum jelly.

Tip 7: Cut your shower time

Sometimes treating dry skin is as simple as changing your lifestyle habits. According to Dr. Gainers, one of the causes of dry skin is taking showers that are too long and/or too hot. As tempting and relaxing as they sound, these showers can strip your skin of its natural oils and dry it out, says Dr. Gainers. Keep your shower five to ten minutes long, using warm water.

Better yet, consider skipping the shower. In the winter, those

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Did You Know?

Using a humidifier daily can help hydrate your skin and prevent dry skin from occurring in the first place.

with severely dry skin might benefit from a shower every other day, adds Dr. Mahmoud.

Tip 8: Sleep with a humidifier

If dry air is to blame for your rough, flaky skin, both Dr. Gainers and Dr. Mahmoud suggest using a humidifier in your home. “Humidifiers work by keeping the humidity level between 30% to 50%,” says Dr. Gainers. “The added moisture in the environment will restore moisture to the skin.” Not only does it help hydrate your skin, but according to Dr. Gainers, using your humidifier daily can prevent dry skin from occurring in the first place. Remember to clean your humidifier regularly to avoid mold from developing.

Tip 9: Wear gloves and socks to bed

Your hands and feet are very susceptible to dryness and Dr. Mahmoud stresses the importance of moisturizing them before bed. But take it one step further and put on gloves and socks to keep the moisture in. He recommends using a thick moisturizer like an ointment or petroleum jelly. Plus, it also prevents your sheets from getting stained with product grease!

Tip 10: Rethink your skin care routine

For many of us, our skin care routine consists of products beyond

the basic cleanser and moisturizer. While products with strong ingredients like glycolic acid and retinoids can be beneficial for your skin, using them incorrectly can disrupt your skin barrier and dry it out, says Dr. Gainers. While you don’t need to throw out your products, using them every other day or twice a week and slowly increasing the frequency of use can help minimize that irritation. Also, starting only one product at a time and waiting two to four weeks before adding another product can be beneficial. “This way, you can better gauge your skin’s reaction and will be able to figure out your frequency of use for that product as well as know if it is giving you an unwanted reaction,” says Dr. Gainers.

If dryness persists, partner with a board-certified dermatologist

If you feel like you’ve just about tried everything to aid your dry skin and it’s still an issue, it may be time to call in the experts. Seeing a board-certified dermatologist can help you determine if your dry skin is truly just dry skin or if it actually represents a disease or a condition like eczema or psoriasis, says Dr. Gainers.

Dry skin can happen to anyone, but for those who struggle with it daily, it can be hard to find a solution. With a few lifestyle changes, the right products and a dermatologist’s help, dealing with dry skin can feel manageable. ●

