Dry skin can be uncomfortable and unattractive. It often shows up as rough, red, and itchy patches in places of the body that show -- arms, hands, lower legs, ankles. But it's also common on the soles of the feet, thighs, and the abdomen.

It can lead to cracks and fissures in the skin. And because cold air outside and heated air inside cause low humidity, it's often worse in winter -- just in time for the holiday party season.

Some dry skin is hereditary. Some comes with aging, as natural skin oils diminish. Some is caused by or can accompany medical conditions such as asthma or thyroid disease. But daily skin care habits such as washing with harsh soaps, using sanitizing or harsh cleansing agents, and scrubbing can also cause or worsen dry skin.

Since most dry skin is due to external causes, it responds well to external skin care treatment. Just making a few adjustments to your daily skin care routine can help. No matter what the cause, there are many things you can do to make dry skin smooth and supple.

**Dry Skin Care Strategies When You Wash**

Treating dry skin is important because extensively dry skin can lead to dermatitis, a more severe inflammation of the skin. Try these tips for the bath or shower:

**Skip long, hot showers.** Hot water strips oils from the skin faster than warm water. Long showers or baths actually result in dried out skin. Try to limit yourself to a single 5- or 10-minute warm shower or bath a day.

**Use a gentle cleanser or shower gel with moisturizer.** Go for unscented, soap-free, or mild soap cleansers instead of harsh cleansers.

**Moisturize while skin is moist.** Pat your skin with a towel after you shower or wash your face or hands, leaving it damp. Apply a moisturizer within three to five minutes of washing to lock moisture in your skin.

**Ingredients to Look for in a Moisturizer**

It's not necessary to pay a fortune for a good, rich moisturizer. Read the label. Ingredients that may be helpful for dry skin include:

**Ceramides.** Ceramides help the skin hold water and soothe dry skin. Synthetic ceramides may mimic the natural substances in the outermost layer of skin that help keep moisture in.

**Hyaluronic acid.** Like ceramides, hyaluronic acid helps skin hold water.

**Lanolin, mineral oil, and petroleum jelly.** These keep water in the skin that has been absorbed during bathing.

**Dimethicone and glycerine.** These draw water to the skin and retain it there.
Be sure to apply sunscreen to areas of your body that are exposed to the sun during the day. Look for a sunscreen with an SPF of 15 or more.

### 5 Lifestyle Tips for Relieving Dry Skin

These strategies can also help make your skin supple and smooth:

- Plug in a humidifier at home to help keep skin hydrated when indoor air is dry during winter months. Wear cotton and other natural fibers. Wool, synthetics, or other fabrics can be scratchy and irritating. Drink plenty of water.
- Eat omega-3 foods. Essential fatty acids can help fortify the skin’s natural oil-retaining barriers. Foods rich in omega-3 include cold-water fish (salmon, halibut, sardines), flax, walnuts, and safflower oil. For itching or inflammation, apply a cool compress or a hydrocortisone cream on the area for a week. If these don’t provide relief, talk to your doctor.

### Dry Skin: Signs of Dermatitis

Some flaking along with redness may be a sign of an underlying dermatitis. This includes:

- **Seborrheic dermatitis.** This type involves a red, scaly, dry-appearing itchy rash on various areas of the body, particularly those areas that contain many oil glands. Seborrheic dermatitis can occur as scaling on the scalp, eyebrows, and sides of the nose.
- **Allergic contact dermatitis.** This occurs when the skin comes into contact with a substance that causes an immune reaction, such as poison ivy. Allergic contact dermatitis of the hands often causes scaling on the fingers.
- **Atopic dermatitis.** Also known as eczema, this is a long-lasting type of dermatitis that often runs in families. It also may cause excessively dry, itchy skin.
- **Athlete’s foot.** In many cases, athlete’s foot, a fungal infection, shows up as dry flaking on the soles of the feet. Untreated, it can progress to skin inflammation and redness typical of dermatitis.

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