Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center

PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

Caring for Your Dry Skin

This information explains how to care for dry skin.

About dry skin

Dry skin can be a problem all year. It's more common in the winter when the humidity is low and the air is dry. Dry skin can itch, flake, crack, or even bleed. It's important to treat dry skin because your skin protects you from the environment and infections. You can treat your dry skin by taking steps to prevent dryness, moisturizing, and adding moisture to your home.

The information below is for people who aren't having radiation therapy. If you're having radiation therapy, your nurse will give you information about how to care for your area of treated skin. Ask your radiation therapy nurse before you do any of the things listed in this resource.

How to relieve your dry skin

Follow the tips below to help with your dry skin. These tips can also be used to prevent dry skin.

Handwashing

- Limit washing your hands to 20 seconds. Use lukewarm water. Even if you have dry skin on your hands, it's important to wash them to help prevent infections.
- Dry your hands with a clean towel or paper towel but leave some water on your hands.
- While your hands are a little wet, apply a pea-sized amount of a gentle, fragrance-free moisturizer to them. You can read the "Moisturizing" section

for more suggestions.

- If you're using hand sanitizer, apply moisturizer as soon as the sanitizer dries.

Showering

- Take a short bath or shower with lukewarm or cool water every other day. If you have to shower daily, take a quick shower. Do not soak in a tub for a long time.
- Some soaps may be harsh on your skin. Wash with a gentle fragrance-free cleanser and use a gentle soap with moisturizer, such as:
  - Cetaphil®
  - Vanicream®
  - Dove®
  - La Roche-Posay®
  - Eucerin®

Moisturizing

- Use a moisturizer with broad-spectrum sunscreen all year round. Broad spectrum sunscreens help protect against both UVA and UVB sun rays. These sunscreens will have "broad spectrum" on the label. If your moisturizer doesn't have sunscreen, you can apply your sunscreen on top of your moisturizer.
- Apply a moisturizer right after you get out of the shower or bath, while your skin is still damp. Most of these moisturizers are available with sunscreen:
  - Aquaphor®
  - Cetaphil®
  - Eucerin®
  - Vanicream
  - Lubriderm®
  - Petroleum jelly (Vaseline®)

- Aveeno®
- CeraVe®
- Sarna with menthol (gives a cooling sensation. You can place it in the fridge to keep it cool.
- La Roche-Posay®

Ointments and creams can be more helpful and less irritating than lotions. Ingredients that help soothe dry skin include lactic acid, urea and hyaluronic acid, glycerin, lanolin, petrolatum, and mineral oil.

- Reapply your moisturizer at bedtime.
- Apply petroleum jelly or the moisturizer recommended by your doctor or nurse to your hands and feet at bedtime. Cover them with cotton gloves, socks, or saran wrap..
- Wear a fragrance-free lip balm that has no vitamins. Use a lip balm with at least SPF 30 during the day. Reapply it as needed.
- After you wash your hands, pat them dry with a towel, then apply moisturizer to your skin.

Look at your skin often. Very dry skin can crack or open. If bacteria gets in, it can lead to an infection.

If your skin is dry stop using deodorant, soaps, and skin care products that contain alcohol, fragrance, retinoids, or alpha-hydroxy acid (AHA).

Clothing

- During the winter, protect your skin by wearing a hat and gloves while outdoors.
- Wear clothing made of 100% cotton and then layer it with woolen clothes.
- Drink plenty of liquids every day.

In your home

- Keep the air in your home moist by lowering the heat. For more information about managing dry air, read our resource *Using Moisture to Manage Dry Air* (www.mskcc.org/pe/moisture-dry-air).
- Wear rubber gloves to avoid direct contact with harsh household cleansers. You should also wear them while doing any wet work, such as washing dishes.. Reapply hand cream throughout the day.
- Use a mild laundry detergent, such as:
  - All® Free Clear
  - Cheer® Free & Gentle
  - Dreft®
  - Tide® Free & Gentle

What to avoid

Dry skin may be sensitive. If you have dry skin, you should avoid:

- Rubbing your skin. Pat your skin with a clean towel to dry off. Don't rub it dry.
- Scratching your skin, even if it's itchy. Scratching will only make it worse.
- Direct contact with fabrics such as wool or angora (wool that comes from the Angora rabbit). They may irritate your skin.
- Use of products that contain alcohol, such as colognes, perfumes, gels, and aftershaves.
- Licking your lips.
- Scrubbing your skin with a loofah or sponge. They contain germs and can irritate your skin.

Call your healthcare provider if you have:

- A fever of 100.4° F (38° C) or higher
- Pain, redness, swelling, or warmth around open or cracked skin
- Pus draining from open or cracked skin
- Severe itching
- Cracks in your skin
- A dry, flaky, or itchy scalp
- Dryness in your lips, eyes, inside of your mouth, ears, or nose
- Dry skin after you tried the tips in this resource
- Any questions or unexpected problems

If you have questions or concerns, contact your healthcare provider. A member of your care team will answer Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Outside those hours, you can leave a message or talk with another MSK provider. There is always a doctor or nurse on call. If you're not sure how to reach your healthcare provider, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

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