

Dry Skin Information Leaflet

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 it 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 :

- 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.
- Smoking

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

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

- 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 and avoid harsh soaps and bubble baths.
- if you smoke, stop or reduce the amount you smoke.

These lifestyle changes may help to 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 moisturise the skin. They can reduce dryness, help with itching, reduce scaling, and soften cracks. They 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.

Emollients often need to be applied even when the skin appears to be fine. This will help to prevent future outbreaks of dry skin.

Keep away from fire, flames and cigarettes when using paraffin-based emollients. Dressings and clothing soaked with the emollients can be easily ignited and can happen even after washing the clothing.

Soap substitutes

Most emollients can be used as soap substitutes to replace traditional soaps. They will help to lock in moisture while still providing the same level of cleanliness.

How to use a soap substitute:

- Mix a small amount (around teaspoonful) of soap substitute in the palm of your hand with a little warm water and spread it over damp or dry skin.
- Rinse and pat the skin dry, being careful not to rub it.
- You can use soap substitutes for handwashing, showering or in the bath.
- They don't foam like normal soap, but are just as effective at cleaning the skin.
- If your skin stings after using an emollient soap substitute and doesn't settle after rinsing, ask a pharmacist to recommend a different soap substitute.

There are various types of emollients which can help to treat and prevent dry skin. If you are not sure which product(s) would be best for you speak to your local community pharmacist.