

DRY SKIN

WHAT IT IS

Dry skin is known medically as Xerosis — a very common condition that increases with age and in locations with colder climates. It manifests as flaky, dry, rough and uneven skin that sometimes has a cracked appearance and, in extreme cases, can bleed and become itchy.

RISK FACTORS

ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE

Cold weather is the most common cause of dry skin due to low outdoor humidity levels and heating systems that force hot and dry air indoors.

Air conditioner units used in warm weather can also induce dry skin since they strip moisture from the atmosphere. Dry skin can also be due to artificial air treatments, like those used in airplanes, that expose the skin to dry air and cause it to lose moisture.

AGE

Dry skin is most common among older adults due, in large part, to an increase in enzymes that break down the natural “mortar” of the skin’s “brick wall.” In older skin, sweat and oil glands also decrease in number and effectiveness. These glands provide necessary building blocks to maintain the integrity of the skin.

ETHNIC VARIATIONS

Darker pigmented skin appears to have superior skin barrier function. This is thought to be due to the lower pH of darker skin, which results in more building blocks and lipid content that can protect the skin from environmental assaults, compared to lighter skin.



CAUSES

Imagine that our outermost layer of skin, or the *stratum corneum*, is a brick wall. The bricks are our skin cells and the mortar is our natural oils. Together, they keep our skin working like a barrier to the outside world, preventing chemicals like allergens and irritants from penetrating while working to help keep hydration in.

Factors that disturb the mortar of our skin’s brick wall and allow water to escape are what cause our skin to become dry and flaky, like a crumbled brick wall.

SOAP AND CLEANSERS

To maintain a healthy skin barrier, a soap or cleaner's pH level should be considered. pH is a logarithmic scale ranging from acidic (0) to alkaline (14), with 7 registered as neutral.

Our skin is naturally acidic with an average pH of 5. Anything that disturbs this will result in damage to the skin's barrier function, which can lead to dry skin.

Other factors include: certain medical conditions, bathing and showering, certain medications and fragrance.

APPEARANCE

The most common areas to present with dry skin are the hands and the lower legs, while the back, the abdomen and the arms are typically less afflicted by the condition.

Dry skin on the hands can present as rough and thick like sandpaper and can lead to deep fissures on the fingertips.



TREATMENT

- The use of vaporizers or humidifiers can help prevent and treat dry skin.
- Avoid antibacterial soaps and cleansers.
- Showering is better than bathing.
- Wash with warm water instead of hot water.
- Blot or pat your skin dry after washing. Do not rub.
- Apply fragrance-free moisturizer immediately after showering or handwashing.
- Use ointments or creams and oils rather than lotions.
- Wear latex-free reusable gloves for all wet work or chemical exposure. Wear a cotton liner under the rubber glove.
- Wear gloves in cold weather.
- Choose fabrics that do not irritate the skin. Natural fibres, like cotton and silk, allow your skin to breathe.



Additional information on Dry Skin is available online.

DERMATOLOGY.CA

