

Treat Dry Skin Naturally

How to undo summer damage with skin-friendly tips...

Dry skin is a term describing skin with a low moisture content, which may have a rough, chapped, or flaking surface.

The surface of the skin consists of a layer of cells that have the ability to absorb and retain water; it is the means by which the skin retains its elasticity. If the water content of these cells falls below 15%, the skin becomes dry. If it falls to less than 10%, the skin loses its flexibility, and cracks and splits appear.

Dry skin also flakes off, and may feel tight. If the dryness is due to skin disease, there may be associated symptoms, such as itching or a rash.

The skin is mainly moisturized by its water content, but it is also lubricated by a mixture of fats and waxes known as *sebum*, produced at the roots of hair follicles. The amount produced varies between individuals, and gives rise to the cosmetic use of the terms 'dry' and 'oily' skin, although in fact these skin types are merely variations of normal skin.

What are the symptoms of dry skin?

- Skin feels overly tight
- Flaking
- Splitting (chapping)
- Scaling

What causes dry skin?

Dry skin is primarily a genetic condition, but it may be caused or aggravated by a poor diet and environmental factors such as wind, cold, chemicals, or even certain cosmetics and excessive washing. Certain nutritional deficiencies also contribute to dry skin, primarily a lack of essential fats, B vitamins, and vitamin A.

Other possible causative factors include:

- ❑ *Atmospheric conditions* – dry winds and extremes of temperature cause evaporation from the skin surface at a faster rate than water can be replaced. The surface layer of cells may also be damaged, and shed (e.g. peeling after sunburn).
- ❑ *Chemicals* – many chemicals, particularly those that dissolve grease, strip the skin of its protective layer of oily sebum, and cause drying. These include domestic detergents and bleach.
- ❑ *Skin diseases* – certain conditions affect the outer layers of the skin, and interfere with their water retaining properties. These include *eczema* (inflammation in the form of a red, itchy rash); *contact dermatitis* (caused by allergy to a particular substance); *seborrhoeic dermatitis* (dandruff); and *psoriasis* (a red, scaly rash, usually affecting elbows and knees).
- ❑ Other possible underlying factors include low thyroid function, iron deficiency anaemia, and leaky gut or malabsorption

How to Prevent Dry Skin?

- Use sun-screen of minimum SPF 15
- Use protective rubber gloves when handling any chemicals, including detergents
- Avoid using harsh, abrasive skin cleaners
- Avoid soap and detergents. Use only mild, natural soaps
- Apply a moisturizing cream to dry, chapped hands
- Wear gloves in hot, cold or windy weather

How to Treat Dry Skin Naturally?

Treatment involves avoiding causative factors (mentioned above), and rehydrating the skin (increasing the moisture content of the skin) with an emollient cream or lotion. Emollients contain water and oil, together with an emulsifying agent that enables the water and oil to mix together. The cream or lotion is then either applied directly to the skin or added to bath water, restoring both water and oil to the skin surface.

Creams containing steroids are sometimes used to settle the inflammation of eczema, psoriasis and allergic dermatitis. These creams, however, should not be used for an extended period of time, as they have many side-effects. Steroid creams must always be used under the supervision of a health care provider.

Note: wrinkling is not caused by dry skin, but is a feature of skin ageing when the underlying connective tissue becomes less elastic due to loss of the protein collagen.

Nutritional recommendations

- To combat dry skin, a balanced diet is important; it should contain vegetables, fruits, grains, and raw nuts and seeds. Protein from vegetable sources is also important, such as beans, pulses, lentils, etc.
- Increase essential fats in the diet (good fats). Dry skin is very often a symptom of a deficiency of essential fatty acids. Have oily fish (e.g. salmon, mackerel, sardines) twice a week and eat raw nuts and seeds daily. Essential fatty acids like omega 3 and 6 oils are usually very effective in the treatment of dry skin because they support skin cells and maintain moisture levels.
- Try to increase your intake of foods rich in vitamin A (or beta carotene) and B vitamins. These include Egg yolk, red, orange and yellow fruits and vegetables, green leafy vegetables, oily fish, wholegrains, lentils, and cruciferous vegetables such as cabbage, cauliflower, and broccoli.
- Vitamin E is also helpful for skin problems, and vitamin-E-based facial creams or Aloe Vera gel have been proven to be effective in combating dry skin and blemish scars. Foods rich in vitamin E include avocados and almonds.
- Eat foods high in sulphur, which helps to keep the skin smooth and youthful. Good sources include garlic, onion, and asparagus.
- **Foods to avoid include:** fried foods, animal fats, soft drinks, sugar, and chocolate. If avoiding these foods is not possible, then it is best to minimise their intake. Also try to decrease alcohol and caffeine as they have a dehydrating effect which causes the body, including skin cells, to lose fluids and essential minerals. Also, certain drugs contribute to dry skin, such as diuretics and antihistamines.

QUIZ: What's Causing My Skin Problem?

Skin problems vary widely in causes and symptoms, but it may help to look at your diet and lifestyle which may be reflected in your skin. Take this quiz to find out:

- Have you been exposing your skin to the sun lately (sunbathing or doing errands in the sun)? Sun exposure dries the skin.
- Are you under a lot of stress? Stress changes the biochemistry of the whole body, and the skin is no exception. Some stress effects on the skin include spots, darker pigments, and dry skin.
- Do you smoke or drink alcohol? Smoking and drinking have a tremendous effect on skin's quality. They give skin a dull shade, as well as many other problems such as spots and dry/oily combinations.
- Do you eat a lot of dairy and sugary foods? Dairy and sugary foods are known to irritate skin and cause various skin conditions.
- Do you have white spots on your nails? This could indicate a zinc deficiency which often results in spots and other skin imbalances
- Do you have a food sensitivity? Being sensitive to a certain type of food can create a skin problem such as pale skin, or dark circles under the eyes.
- Are you depressed? Depression has many effects on the body, including the skin. It is important to address the cause of depression in order to help the skin look better.
- Do you exercise? Regular moderate exercise improves circulation and helps many health conditions, including skin problems.

After addressing the above factors, refer to the *nutritional recommendations* section of this article to start improving your skin!

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