

Dry skin and eczema

The Health Column

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Dry skin is a common problem and the cold, dryness of winter weather can exacerbate this condition. Dry skin all year round is particularly common in older people, and can be due to multiple reasons.

The cause of dry skin involves genetic as well as environmental factors. Numerous factors can predispose a person to dry skin including a cold or dry climate, very hot showers and the use of alkaline soaps, cleansers and shampoos. Age related changes to the skin's structure and subsequent water content leads to increasing dryness of skin with advancing age.

Dry skin may present as rough, scaly, itchy skin and often occurs on the lower legs and the arms. It may also present as burning or stinging with a feeling of skin tightness, especially after it has been wet.

Management of dry skin involves the avoidance of the environmental factors mentioned above and symptomatic treatment to restore the skin's epidermal barrier and maintain hydration of the skin's stratum corneum layer. The mainstay of treatment is liberal and frequent use of moisturising agents to rehydrate the skin and relieve the discomfort from scaling and itch. Many different moisturisers are commercially available and your pharmacist is ideally placed to advise on the best treatment option for your condition. Avoidance of alkali soaps and shampoos is also beneficial as they can affect the skin's naturally acidic mantle; again pharmacists can provide advice on soap and shampoo alternatives.

Eczema, or atopic dermatitis, is a recurring, non-infectious inflammatory skin condition affecting one in three Australasians at some stage in their lives.

Eczema usually appears in early childhood and most children grow out of the condition. Adult onset eczema is often difficult to treat and may be caused by other factors such as medicines. Eczema presents as red, dry, itchy and scaly skin and in severe cases may weep, bleed and crust over causing great discomfort.

The condition is most common in people with a family history of an atopic (allergic) disorder, such as asthma or hay fever. External factors can also play a role and include irritants, such as tobacco smoke, chemicals, temperature and humidity, and allergens such as house dust mites, moulds, grasses, foods, pets, washing powders and toiletries.



Management of eczema can be difficult and your doctor or pharmacist can advise on the best treatment options. In addition there are self-care strategies that will assist to treat and avoid an eczema outbreak, such as:

- Keeping the skin moist by avoiding soap and applying moisturiser.
- Wearing 100% cotton or soft fabrics - avoiding rough, scratchy fibres and tight clothing.
- Using rubber gloves with cotton liners.
- Having lukewarm baths and showers using a non-soap cleanser or hypoallergenic bath oil.
- Gently patting, not rubbing, the skin dry with a soft towel.
- Applying a moisturiser within three minutes after bathing to 'lock in' the moisture.
- When possible, avoiding rapid changes of temperature and activities that raise a sweat.
- Removing carpets and rugs from houses (if possible) and keeping pets outside.
- Ventilating the house as often as possible.
- Avoiding stuffed toys which harbour dust mites.
- Changing bed linen regularly and using specialised dust mite prevention covers.
- Reducing daily stress.

Your local community pharmacy is your health destination and your Self Care pharmacist can give you more information about issues affecting dry skin and eczema. Your local Self Care pharmacy also has a range of Fact Cards, including that titled *Eczema and dermatitis*, which can help you.

For the nearest Self Care pharmacy location phone the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia on 1300 369 772, or go to www.psa.org.au/selfcare, then click 'Find a *Self Care pharmacy* near you'.