SYMPTOM

Dry skin and itching

Dry skin and itching can cause rough, flaky, or tight skin and an urge to scratch.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
Tight, rough, flaky skin with an urge to scratch

WHERE IT IS FELT
Anywhere, often hands, legs, arms, or trunk

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Dry air, frequent washing, eczema

WHEN IT IS URGENT
Painful spreading redness, warmth, swelling, or pus

USUALLY LASTS
Days to weeks, longer while the trigger continues

SEE A DOCTOR IF
It disrupts sleep, affects daily life, or keeps returning

Overview

Dry skin can feel rough, tight, or uncomfortable. It often causes itching, also called pruritus. Scratching may briefly relieve the itch, but it can further damage the skin and make the itching worse.

Dryness and itching are symptoms, not a single disease. They often result from weather, washing habits, or a common skin condition. Less often, widespread itching can be related to a medicine or a health condition elsewhere in the body.

The location, appearance, timing, and possible triggers can all help narrow down the cause.

What it may feel or look like

Dry skin may look flaky, scaly, cracked, or slightly red. On brown or black skin, affected areas may appear grey, purple, darker, or lighter than the surrounding skin. Fine lines may become more noticeable.

Your skin may feel tight after washing. Itching can range from a mild irritation to a strong urge to scratch. It may be worse at night, after a hot shower, or when the air is dry.

Repeated scratching can cause small cuts, thickened skin, bleeding, or crusting. These changes may make it harder to tell what the skin looked like when the itching began.

Common causes

Common causes include cold or dry weather, indoor heating, frequent handwashing, long hot showers, and harsh soaps. Skin also tends to hold less moisture with age.

Eczema can cause dry, inflamed, itchy patches. Contact dermatitis happens when something touching the skin irritates it or triggers an allergic reaction. Possible triggers include fragrances, detergents, metals, hair products, and skin-care products.

Other possible causes include psoriasis, fungal infections, insect bites, hives, and scabies. Scabies often causes intense nighttime itching and small bumps or lines, commonly around the fingers, wrists, waist, or genitals. Other household members may also itch.

A new medicine can sometimes cause itching, with or without a visible rash. Do not stop a prescribed medicine on your own, but contact the prescriber or a pharmacist for advice.

Less commonly, itching across much of the body without a clear rash may be associated with liver, kidney, thyroid, blood, or nerve conditions. This does not mean that a serious illness is likely, but persistent or unexplained symptoms should be assessed.

When to seek medical care

Call emergency services if itching occurs with trouble breathing, faintness, or sudden swelling of your lips, tongue, mouth, or throat. These can be signs of a severe allergic reaction.

Emergency care is also needed for widespread blistering or peeling skin, especially with fever, eye pain, mouth sores, or a recently started medicine.

Seek same-day medical advice if you have painful or rapidly spreading redness, warmth, swelling, pus, or fever. These may be signs of a skin infection. Contact your maternity team promptly if you are pregnant and develop new widespread itching, especially on your palms or soles.

Book a routine appointment if the itching:

Yellow skin or eyes, very dark urine, unexplained weight loss, or marked tiredness should also be discussed promptly with a healthcare professional.

- Disrupts sleep or daily activities

- Persists despite regular skin care
- Keeps returning or affects most of your body
- Starts after a new medicine
- Occurs without an obvious rash or cause

How the cause is found

A healthcare professional may ask when the symptoms began, where they occur, and whether anyone else at home is itchy. They may ask about bathing, skin products, work exposures, allergies, travel, medicines, and other symptoms.

The skin will usually be checked for dryness, inflammation, infection, bites, or patterns linked with conditions such as eczema or scabies.

Tests are not always needed. Depending on the findings, testing may include a skin scraping for fungus or mites, allergy patch testing, or blood tests. Blood tests may be considered when itching is widespread, persistent, or not explained by the skin examination.

Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on the cause. For simple dry skin, the main goal is to restore moisture and reduce irritation.

Use a thick, fragrance-free cream or ointment several times a day, especially just after washing while the skin is still slightly damp. Ointments are greasier than creams but often hold moisture better. Lotions may be less helpful for very dry skin.

Take brief baths or showers with lukewarm rather than hot water. Use a mild, fragrance-free cleanser only where needed. Gently pat the skin dry instead of rubbing it.

You may also find it helpful to:

A pharmacist can advise whether an anti-itch product is suitable. Antihistamines like cetirizine or loratadine help some allergy-related itching but do not treat dry skin itself. Some can cause drowsiness. Steroid like prednisone or hydrocortisone creams may help certain inflamed skin conditions, but they should be used only as directed.

Prescription treatment may be needed for eczema, infection, scabies, or another identified cause.

- Wear soft, loose clothing and avoid rough wool against the skin

- Keep fingernails short and use a cool compress instead of scratching
- Choose fragrance-free laundry and skin-care products
- Use a humidifier safely if indoor air is very dry

What to expect

Dryness caused by weather, washing, or irritating products often improves over days to weeks with regular moisturising and trigger avoidance. It may return when the air becomes dry or washing increases.

Eczema and some other skin conditions can come and go. Persistent itching usually improves best when the underlying cause is identified and treated. Skin damaged by scratching may take longer to settle than the original dryness.

Common questions

Can dry skin itch without a rash?

Yes. Dryness may cause itching before there is obvious redness or scaling. Scratching can later create bumps, marks, or thickened areas.

Is dry skin contagious?

Dry skin and eczema are not contagious. Some causes of itching, including scabies and certain fungal infections, can spread between people.

Why is the itching worse at night?

Warm bedding, fewer distractions, and normal nighttime changes in the skin can make itching more noticeable. Nighttime itching alone does not identify the cause.

Should I scratch an itch?

Try pressing, tapping, or applying a cool compress instead. Repeated scratching can break the skin and increase inflammation or infection risk.

Sources

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