SYMPTOM

Dry skin

Dry skin lacks enough moisture or natural oils, making it feel rough, tight, or flaky.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
Rough, tight, itchy, or flaky skin

WHERE IT IS FELT
Often hands, lower legs, arms, or face

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Cold air, frequent washing, harsh soaps

WHEN IT IS URGENT
Spreading redness, warmth, swelling, pus, or fever

USUALLY LASTS
Days to weeks, depending on weather, skin care, and cause

SEE A DOCTOR IF
Persistent, severe, cracked, bleeding, or disturbing sleep

Overview

Dry skin happens when the outer layer of your skin loses too much water or natural oil. The medical term is xerosis .

It can affect anyone. It is especially common during cold or dry weather, after frequent washing, and as skin becomes thinner with age. Most cases improve with gentle skin care and regular use of a moisturiser.

Dry skin is a symptom, not one specific disease. Sometimes it is linked to eczema, another skin condition, a medicine, or an illness affecting the rest of the body.

What it may feel or look like

Dry skin may feel tight, rough, itchy, or uncomfortable. It can look dull, flaky, scaly, or slightly red. Fine lines may become more noticeable.

Very dry skin can develop painful cracks, also called fissures . These often occur on the hands, fingertips, heels, or lower legs. Deeper cracks may bleed.

The skin may itch before there is much to see. Scratching can then cause more irritation,

broken skin, or thickened patches.

Dry skin can occur anywhere, but exposed areas and places with fewer oil glands are often affected. These include the hands, arms, lower legs, feet, and face.

Common causes

Common causes affect the skin's protective barrier, which normally helps keep moisture in and irritants out.

Skin conditions such as atopic eczema, contact dermatitis, psoriasis, and ichthyosis can also cause dryness. Dermatitis means inflamed skin. It often causes itching, redness, or a rash as well as dryness.

Less commonly, widespread or persistent dryness may be associated with an underactive thyroid, diabetes, kidney or liver disease, poor nutrition, or certain medicines. These causes usually produce other symptoms too.

Dry, inflamed skin can occasionally become infected after cracking or repeated scratching. Infection is not a common cause of ordinary dry skin, but it can change how quickly you need care.

- Weather and indoor heating: Cold air, low humidity, air conditioning, and central heating can remove moisture from skin
- Washing and bathing: Long or hot showers, frequent handwashing, and swimming in chlorinated water can dry the skin
- Soaps and other products: Strong soaps, detergents, fragrances, alcohol-based products, and household cleaners can irritate skin
- Age: Skin usually produces less oil with age
- Work and hobbies: Regular contact with water, chemicals, soil, or cleaning products can damage the skin barrier

When to seek medical care

Book a routine appointment if the dryness is severe, keeps returning, does not improve with self-care, or affects your sleep or daily activities. You should also arrange an assessment if you have widespread scaling, unexplained skin changes, or deep cracks that keep bleeding.

Seek advice promptly if you have diabetes, reduced feeling in your feet, or poor circulation and develop a crack or sore on a foot.

Get same-day medical care if dry or cracked skin develops signs of infection, such as:

Call emergency services if you develop widespread blistering or peeling, especially with sores in your mouth or eyes, trouble breathing, or swelling of your face or tongue. These symptoms are not typical of simple dry skin.

- Redness that is spreading
- Increasing warmth, swelling, or pain
- Pus, yellow crusting, or red streaks
- Fever or feeling generally unwell

How the cause is found

A healthcare professional will usually ask when the dryness began, where it occurs, and what makes it better or worse. They may ask about soaps, skin products, work exposures, medicines, allergies, and other symptoms.

Examining the skin is often enough to identify likely causes. The pattern and appearance can help distinguish simple dryness from eczema, psoriasis, infection, or another condition.

Tests are not usually needed. If there are clues to an allergy, patch testing may be considered. This checks whether specific substances trigger contact dermatitis. Blood tests may be used when symptoms suggest a thyroid problem, diabetes, or another condition affecting the body. A small skin sample is rarely needed.

Treatment and self-care

The main aim is to restore moisture and protect the skin barrier.

Apply a fragrance-free moisturiser several times a day, especially after washing. Thick creams and ointments usually hold in more water than thin lotions. Applying the product while your skin is still slightly damp can help trap moisture.

Other helpful steps include:

A greasy ointment such as petroleum jelly can protect small cracks. A clean dressing may reduce rubbing. Do not put moisturiser into a deep, dirty, or infected wound without medical advice.

Products containing urea or lactic acid can soften thick, scaly skin, but they may sting cracked or inflamed areas. "Natural" or scented products can also cause irritation.

If eczema or another condition is responsible, treatment may include a medicated cream or ointment. Use these as directed by a healthcare professional. An infection or an underlying health condition may need separate treatment.

Some emollients can soak into clothing, dressings, and bedding and make them easier to ignite. Keep treated fabrics away from cigarettes, flames, and other heat sources.

- Use warm rather than hot water
- Keep showers and baths short
- Choose a gentle, fragrance-free cleanser
- Pat skin dry instead of rubbing
- Wear gloves for washing dishes, cleaning, or cold-weather exposure
- Use a humidifier if indoor air is very dry
- Avoid scratching and keep fingernails short

What to expect

Dryness caused by weather, washing, or irritating products often improves over days to weeks once the trigger is reduced and moisturiser is used regularly.

It may return during winter, with frequent handwashing, or when moisturiser is stopped. Skin conditions such as eczema can come and go and may need an ongoing skin-care plan.

If the skin is not improving, the diagnosis may need to be reviewed. Persistent itching or scaling does not always come from simple dryness.

Common questions

Is dry skin contagious?

Simple dry skin is not contagious. Some infections can look dry or scaly, so an expanding ring-shaped patch or a new rash after close contact may need assessment.

Does dry skin mean I am dehydrated?

Usually not. Local dry skin is more often related to weather, washing, irritants, or the skin barrier. Severe dehydration can affect the skin, but it normally causes other symptoms such as marked thirst, dizziness, or reduced urination.

Will drinking more water fix it?

Drinking enough fluid supports general health, but extra water does not usually replace moisturiser or repair an irritated skin barrier.

Why is dry skin often itchy at night?

Heat, bedding, and fewer distractions can make itching feel more noticeable. Regular moisturising and keeping the bedroom comfortably cool may help. Seek advice if itching repeatedly disturbs your sleep.

Sources

- American Academy of Dermatology Association: Dermatologists' top tips for relieving dry skin
- American Academy of Dermatology Association: Dry skin-Diagnosis and treatment
- NHS: Dry skin
- DermNet: Dry skin
- Mayo Clinic: Dry skin-Symptoms and causes