

How to treat dry skin



Self-care

Moisturisers such as creams, ointments, gels, lotions, emollients or bath/shower additives are available to purchase at a low cost from most supermarkets and pharmacies in Bexley. These products are used frequently to soothe, hydrate, moisturise and help reduce water loss from the skin. They can reduce dryness, help with itching, reduce scaling and soften cracks. They are different from steroid creams and ointments which reduce inflammation and clear flare-ups of eczema.

What is dry skin?

Dry skin is a very common condition, which can appear at any age. It usually doesn't present a serious problem but can often be associated with other medical conditions such as eczema, contact dermatitis and psoriasis.

What causes dry skin?

- Excessive bathing or showering or using very hot water, scrubbing of the skin while washing, or harsh soaps (containing sodium lauryl sulphate) that dissolve the skin's protective layer.
- Environmental conditions that increase water loss such as very hot dry weather or central heating. Frequent exposure to wind and sun can evaporate water from the skin, making the surface feel itchy and dry.
- Sebaceous glands produce a substance called sebum, which is responsible for keeping the skin and hair moisturised. Decreased production of sebum can cause dry skin; this is often a factor in the elderly.
- Some medical conditions such as hypothyroidism and diabetes.

What can you do to help prevent and treat dry skin?

- Avoid overheating the house, instead try wearing layers and use tepid water, mild soaps/cleansers and reduce the length of time in the bath or when showering.
- Wear protective rubber gloves when washing up or cleaning.
- Drink plenty of water
- Be aware of your surroundings – dry air (low humidity) increases the risk of dry skin. Increasing humidity can help, which can be achieved by placing a damp towel on a warm radiator.
- Avoid perfumed moisturisers, harsh soaps and bubble baths.

These lifestyle changes may help reduce the dryness of the skin but further moisturising may still be required, in which case, emollients (moisturisers) can be used.

How to choose the best emollient (moisturisers)?

There are several types and brands of moisturisers – creams, lotions and ointments. As a general rule, the greasier and thicker the moisturiser is, the better and longer it works.

Moisturisers added to the bath should generally be avoided since they are likely to make your bath greasy and slippery, increasing the chance of falling. There is no evidence that they are more effective than moisturisers applied to damp skin after getting out of the bath. This is because as you dry yourself after bathing, the “moisturiser” added to the bath water is removed on the towel therefore it is not left on the skin

The most effective moisturiser will depend on the dryness of your skin, the area of skin involved, and your preference. Try to purchase small quantities of different types, to find a product that suits you.

Some general advice on finding the right moisturiser:

- Use a lotion or cream for mild skin dryness and occasional flare ups of eczema
- Use a thicker cream or an ointment for moderate-to-severe dryness
- A lotion is often best for areas of hairy skin
- Use a cream or lotion for areas of weeping eczema



How to use emollients (moisturisers)?

Apply moisturiser when skin is wet as this helps to trap in some moisture. Use moisturiser frequently and at least twice a day if skin is very dry to maintain moisture within the skin. The hand and face area may require more frequent applications than other parts of the body.

- Re-apply moisturiser every time after washing hands.
- Avoid alcohol-based products such as hand gels.
- Apply moisturisers in the same direction of hair growth to reduce the likelihood of hair follicles becoming blocked, as this can then lead to itching.

Most people with eczema will be prescribed a steroid cream or ointment to use when eczema flares up. These are very different to moisturisers, and should be used and applied in a different way. If you use the two treatments – apply the moisturiser, wait 10 to 15 minutes and then apply the steroid cream or ointment.

When to contact your GP practice

If you are unclear which treatment would be best, or if you already take medication for other conditions, your local pharmacist can advise on appropriate treatments for you or your children.

You only need to visit your GP if skin has become cracked and is weeping or bleeding, or if it has become infected or you have a diagnosed long term skin disorder (e.g. eczema, contact dermatitis and psoriasis) that requires repeated treatment so a prescription may be required.

Further information

- Ask your pharmacist
- Visit NHS choices: www.nhs.uk

