

Michelle Tarbox, M.D.

Why does our skin feel dry in the winter?

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Sometimes it makes more sense to kind of boil things down to basic principles. So we've all played with water since we were probably old enough to handle objects. And one of the fun things kids like to do is they like to pour water one cup into another right? And one of the foundational principles of water is that basically it always moves downhill even on a microscopic scale. We have a lot of water in our bodies, and there's also water in the air. When it gets cold outside and we turn the heaters on it tends to dehydrate the air so there's a greater gradient between the air and our skin and we lose more water to the environment. So we're much more vulnerable to dry skin, dry hair, nails and dry lips.

How can we prevent dryness?

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The most important thing is to protect your skin's barrier. One of our skin's most important functions is keeping us waterproof to the outside world, keeping our body water and nutrients inside and preventing from loss to the outside air as well as preventing from contamination from the outside. When our skin's barrier gets damaged, which can happen through dry air, which can happen through harsh detergents, chemicals that are irritating to the skin or through very hot water, we're going to lose water to the environment more quickly. So protecting your skin's barrier involves being kind and gentle to your skin. Not bathing with over hot water, not using overly harsh detergents and replacing moisture as needed.

Are there things we can do throughout the year to help our skin during the winter?

01:26

Our skin goes through different needs throughout the year and listening to what your body's telling you can be a great way to take the very best care of your skin. In the wintertime our skin tends to feel a little bit dry tends to feel a little bit sensitive. And that's when we know we need to give it extra moisturization we need to give it extra gentleness and use cleansers only that are doing the work that they need to do cleansing the skin without adding extra harsh chemicals or irritation. In the summertime our skin can have different needs. When we're perspiring a lot perhaps we're producing extra oil, we might in those summer months need a different skincare regimen. So for some people, the same regimen doesn't necessarily carry them throughout the entire year. But often you're able to use complementary products that are made similarly with similar ingredients to avoid irritation or allergy.

Are there products that people should stay away from in the winter time?

02:13

Most people don't need anything astringent in the wintertime unless you're really over producing oil, a very astringent toners probably not necessary in the winter months. Very harsh cleansers on non dirty body surfaces are also really not needed. Some people like to get into the shower and suds themselves all up like a little suds monster and then rinse all of that off. You really don't need to put a thick coating of soap anywhere except for the dirty areas. The ones that come in contact with the world or the ones where we personally sweat, hands feet, armpits, groin those areas need to be cleansed with soap, but your arms and the tops of your legs. Those are not really areas that need to have direct soap contact

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and actually doing that kind of soaping and that sudsing on that kind of area skin is more likely to lead to dryness and irritation.

Why might someone experience more hair loss during the winter time?

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We are when it boils down to brass tacks. We're mammals, you know and animals change their hair and fur density over the years some people respond similarly to the change in seasons, I have some patients little shed every fall, I have some patients little shed every winter. And it's just the way their body responds to the changing environment around them. A mild shed like that often goes unnoticed. But when you have a significant stress added on top of it, it can be somewhat distressing. We've had some patients of course stressed out over the COVID pandemic, or people who've recovered from COVID that have had significant hair shedding. And some patients will also have that as a seasonal phenomenon. The important thing to stress is that for the vast majority of patients, this is not a permanent circumstance and it can be reversed with proper nutrition and support. If the hair loss is very severe, it's really important to seek medical care. And if there's any other factors involved with the hair loss, a lot of itching, a lot of redness, a lot of scaling, that might be an indication of something more serious that needs medical attention.

Is there any way to prevent that hair loss?

04:02

Hair loss can become a problem for a variety of reasons. Sometimes the hair is falling from the root. And that's what we normally see with stress induced hair loss. But sometimes the hair can also be breaking. When you're talking about hair breakage. There are a lot of things you can do to help prevent that kind of complication including gentle products avoiding things that have a lot of foaming agent, there's something called sodium lauryl sulfate that tends to cause a lot of foaming, we're sort of addicted to foam. In the United States we like to suds things up. That's how we feel clean, but that's not really necessary for proper cleansing. And it can be pretty harsh, especially in certain hair types. So avoiding things that cause that foaming to occur avoiding things that are sulfate containing so if you look for sulfate free shampoo products that can often help to protect the hair from that dehydration. Getting good moisturization is also a good idea as is handling the hair carefully. I think we learned a lot of bad habits from the media. Some people have learned to get out of the shower and immediately start scrubbing their hair vigorously with the towel. You want to think about your hair as a fine fabric, you wouldn't take a beautiful satin gown and scrub at it with something like a little Brillo cloth, you would very gently dry it. You want to do that with your hair as well. You also don't want to comb aggressively through the hair when it's wet hair is the most vulnerable when it's wet, it's the most fragile and that time, that's the time to very carefully and gently comb out any tangles with like fingers or broad tooth comb, and then to apply something moisturizing. I really like natural products. A lot of patients do well with things such as argan oil, which is a great way to add a little moisture back to the hair. Leave on conditioners that are well selected for patients based off of their individual sensitivities can also be very beneficial.

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What should people consider when styling their hair during the winter?

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Another thing I like for patients to think about in the winter months is how to be kind to their hair with respect to styling. Some people kind of put their hair through a daily torture regimen where it's washed, rinsed vigorously, rubbed dry vigorously, and then blow dried within an inch of its life. I want you to think about sparing hairstyles, things that will give your hair a chance to kind of rest and not necessarily be exposed to harsh heat or straightening techniques. So you might notice that I have naturally curly hair, I have learned to respect my natural hair texture over the course of my life. And I know now something I didn't know when I was a younger person, which is if I just leave it alone, it does really, really well. If I tried to do all the torture devices to it, it ends up a big frizzy, angry balled mess. And that's again my hair telling me what it needs it doesn't need. So your individual hair texture may vary. But what you can do is try to give your hair breaks in between periods of intensive styling. If you've got something important coming up and you need that blow dried finish for a big family event or something like that. That's fine, that's reasonable. But try to alternate that with gentle hairstyling that doesn't put too much tension on the hair and doesn't require too much in terms of heat.

When should you ask your physician about dry skin?

06:49

Some dry skin during the winter months is very normal. But if you're developing fissures and cracks in the skin that won't heal, especially over a period of weeks. Even if you're trying to be gentle with the skin, trying to apply good gentle moisturizers, you probably want to seek out some professional help, especially if the problems worsening if it's causing significant distress or symptoms and if it's preventing good sleep or function.

When should you see a physician about hair loss?

07:13

If you're having ongoing hair loss that's lasted more than a couple of weeks and you're finding a lot of hair in the shower, especially if it's starting to cause you to be able to visualize more of your scalp or if it's accompanied by other symptoms itching or pain in the scalp, it would be appropriate to seek out some medical attention for that there may be a vitamin or nutrient deficiency at play, there may be something causing damage to the scalp or the hair some kind of inflammation or even infective process that needs medical attention. So if it's something that's ongoing, something that's getting worse, or something that's causing significant discomfort, it's appropriate to seek medical care.

What skin issues should we look out for when it comes to children and teenagers?

07:49

When we're talking about children, different age groups face different problems in very young children, there's often a deficiency of something called natural moisturizing factor. So our skin actually makes something called natural moisturizing factor. If you've ever had a little baby or taking care of a little baby that has that red flaky, strong eczema on the cheeks, that's an area where actually children don't develop the natural moisturizing factor in that part of the skin till they're older. So they may need a little

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extra help putting moisturizers into those areas of dryness of the skin. Sometimes also children aren't able to recognize the signs and symptoms of the meeting to have extra skincare or have them starting to develop irritation from externally applied products as quickly as an adult or younger or an older child might notice that. So some of the things that can cause those exacerbations include the hand sanitizers, which we're having to have kids use a lot and right now because of the pandemic. Giving them extra attention, and I like to have the parents actually give them extra special little tubes of their own hand moisturizer to have in their backpack. So they can think about when their hands get choppy and try to put something on during the day and help combat some of those forces. With little children really, it's all a game of awareness and attention. When it comes to teenagers, it tends to be more of a game of overdoing. So teenagers start to change their bathing habits because their bodies are changing. And sometimes there's some overbathing that goes on in that age population, because they really want to have just the most crisp, clean smell all the time and they don't want to have any kind of you know, teenage funk for lack of a better descriptor. Now that can be very well motivated. But we need to stress with our young patients also that putting soap and extra detergents and cleansing agents on the areas of the skin that really don't produce significant sweater aren't dirty isn't necessary and might cause more skin irritation. This goes double for teenagers with acne. I remember being a teenager and thinking if I could just nuke these pimples they would go away and not cause so much distress for me in putting all sorts of crazy stuff on my face like toothpaste and nail polish remover and the dermatologist in me now shudders to think what teenage me did back then. But really that kind of harsh treatment of acne prone skin especially in the harsh winter months can create a bit of a backlash of oil over production and actually worsen the acne. So the gentleness game still is at play even with oily skin that's prone to acne in the wintertime.

Is there anything else you would like to add?

10:01

In the wintertime, it's easy to think that the sun is sort of out of sight out of mind. But really, if the sun can see you, then you can see it and it can potentially affect your skin. So you really do want to think about sun protection all year long. Changing your regimen based off of the season is reasonable. We have more clothing protection typically in the wintertime, but still remember those exposed surfaces, your hands if they're exposed in absolutely your face this high frequency areas like the nose and the ears, you really want to be careful to protect those from the sun all year long. On the same way you also want to think about protecting your eyes good sunglasses all year long are going to help to protect your eyes against cataracts and damage to the retina. And think about your mucous membranes. Our lips in our nose tend to get dehydrated in the winter months just like our skin does. So you might need extra moisture in the form of a saline nasal spray and extra either chapstick or vaseline or just good old petrolatum if you got that for your lips, it's very helpful to keep them moisturized and soft in the winter months.