

# The management of dry skin disorders in children

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## Introduction

Dry skin is a common condition that is, in most cases, not serious, but may be uncomfortable, and worsened by scratching or neglect.

## What is dry skin?

Dry skin, also known as xerosis or xeroderma, is a persistent, generalised feeling of dryness or roughness of the skin. The surface of the skin is protected from dehydration by a thin layer of sebum or natural oil. Dry skin may result when the oil is depleted, or production of the sebum is disrupted. As the skin becomes dry, it may become more sensitive and prone to rashes and breakdown.

## Causes

There is no single cause of dry skin. Potential causes include:

- Dry weather conditions, including wind and extreme heat.
- Central heating and air conditioning, heaters, and wood burning fires all reduce humidity.
- Frequent and lengthy hot baths and showers break down the lipid barriers of the skin, as does frequent swimming.
- Many soaps, shampoos, and bubble bath products strip lipids from the skin.
- Sun damage, resulting from excessive exposure, breaks down collagen and elastin fibres, resulting in deep wrinkles and loose skin.
- Atopic dermatitis or eczema is a chronic skin condition that may present with dry, flaking skin. Eczema tends to present in the skin folds, and may also manifest with red, scaly lesions.
- Psoriasis is a skin condition marked by a rapid build-up of rough, dry, dead skin that forms scales.

- Thyroid disorders, such as hypothyroidism, reduce the activity of oil glands.

## Symptoms

Symptoms of dry skin include discomfort due to skin tightness and itching. Areas such as the arms, hands, lower legs and abdomen, and areas of friction, such as ankles and soles, tend to be most affected. As skin dryness becomes more severe, cracks and fissures may develop.

The itchy feeling may worsen the dry skin, as the "itch-scratch" cycle develops. This is often seen when conscious control of scratching is absent, for instance, during sleep, and in small children.

## Complications

Severe itching may lead to the formation of bumps or lesions, and these may be opened during repeated scratching, and become susceptible to secondary bacterial infections. Severe dry skin may worsen eczema, causing redness, cracking and inflammation.

## Treatment

The main treatment for dry skin is frequent, daily lubrication. External creams and lotions can effectively control dry skin outbreaks. Creams that do not contain colourants and perfumes are generally preferred, especially when used on small children and infants. Thick emollients, such as emulsifying ointment, can be applied. Aqueous creams may be used in place of regular soaps and conditioners, especially for children who have dry skin. The cream can be applied to the skin before getting into the bath, and then gently washed off.

Mild topical steroid creams, e.g. hydrocortisone cream, can be used to control the itchy feeling, but should not be used

over extensive areas, or on broken skin. Where possible, children with dry skin should be dressed in cotton and clothing made from natural fibres. Wool, although natural, often causes itching, and should be avoided. Clothes should fit loosely to prevent skin friction, washed in mild detergents, and rinsed well.

### Conclusion

Dry skin is an uncomfortable and often unsightly condition. Most dry skin results from environmental factors such as low humidity and excessive bathing. These factors can be controlled with moisturisers, decreased time in the bath, and comfortable clothing.

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