

Winter Skin Tips



Moving between the cold outdoors and an overheated and dry home can aggravate eczema symptoms.

With eczema the skin barrier isn't working as it should. As well as protecting from allergens and irritations, the skin barrier is an important part of controlling the body temperature.

Eczema is individual and we all have different triggers. Most of us find summer (due to the heat) rather than winter worse but there are others who are completely the opposite. Because eczema sufferers' skin produces fewer fats and oils, it can't protect effectively against bacteria and irritants. This means everyday substances such as soap, bubble bath and washing-up liquid can make skin irritated, cracked and inflamed.

Here are some ways to counter winter's effects on your eczema symptoms:

- **Moisturise Moisturise Moisturise.** Vigilantly maintain the treatment regimen your Dermatologist recommends. You should be washing with a moisture-rich soap free wash or it's a good time to change to a sensitive skin bath and shower oil, and be moisturising your skin at least once, but possibly twice a day. Take a fresh look at your moisturising regimen – it may be that during the winter months if your skin is drying more you either need to use something heavy duty such as an ointment or possibly to moisturise more frequently. Ask your Dermatologist for suggestions to make sure you're using the best product for your skin.
- **Use topical steroids.** If you have a flare-up, use the steroid cream recommended by your Dermatologist. If an over-the-counter hydrocortisone cream isn't helping enough, ask your Dermatologist about switching to a prescription-strength formula as sometimes you need to use a stronger strength to manage winter flares. Topical steroids are usually recommended for use twice a day, to be applied when the skin is slightly moist — right after cleansing.
- **Humidify dry air.** You might need a humidifier inside your home, especially if you use forced-air heat during the winter. If you do use a humidifier, use distilled water and clean the machine's parts regularly. Keep the house not too warm and not too cold, with humidity between 45 and 55 percent. Sitting in front of fires or radiators, or even having hot baths are all no-nos.

- **Protect your skin from winter sun.** Use a sunscreen of at least 30 SPF on any skin that will be exposed when you go outside. Be sure to use sunscreen for sensitive skin, and check the label for any ingredients your skin may be sensitive to.
- **Wear gloves outside.** Protect your hands and wrists by wearing gloves. Buy a variety of gloves in different fabrics for different weather conditions.
- **Take off wet items.** Gloves, shoes, socks, hats, and outerwear all can get wet quickly from rain. Don't let eczema skin be in contact with damp clothing if you can avoid it.
- **Avoid sweating.** You want to dress warmly when you are out and about to protect your skin, but at the same time, don't overdress. Sweaty skin can trigger a flare-up of eczema symptoms. Try layering so you can control your comfort level. If you do get sweaty, rinse off, pat dry, and moisturize as soon as possible.
- **Dress in comfortable fabrics.** Fabrics such as wool can be very irritating to eczematous skin. Choose soft fabrics (even synthetic ones) or cotton clothing. It's important to keep your temperature level by wearing layers that can be added or removed as necessary.
- **Avoid harsh detergents.** Make sure to launder clothes in a detergent that is specifically designed for sensitive skin, free of dyes and perfumes. Also avoid softeners unless they are hypoallergenic for sensitive skin.
- **Stay away from smoke.** Whether it's wood smoke from a fireplace (the heat of which is also drying to skin) or cigarette smoke at a holiday party, smoke may exacerbate eczema symptoms.
- **Control allergens.** If you know that you tend to get an eczema rash around specific allergens or triggers — maybe it's a food allergy or that dust mites or pet dander aggravate your skin — continue to take steps to manage the allergens.
- **Clean up the right way.** Frequent bathing or hot showers or baths can strip your skin of natural oils. Avoid deodorant bars, antibacterial soaps, perfumed soaps, and skin care products containing alcohol. Instead, use warm water and soap free wash or hypoallergenic bath oil, or just use your moisturiser as a body wash. Limit your showers or baths to no more than 10 minutes, pat dry, and moisturise while your skin is still damp.
- **Avoid Winter Bugs.** Being unwell, such as having a common cold, can make eczema flare. Bacterial and viral infections can also make it worse. For instance, the bug Staphylococcus will make skin yellow, crusty and inflamed while having a cold sore virus can cause a sudden painful flare-up.

*The information in this article was obtained from The National Eczema Society
& The British Association of Dermatologists*

This Information Sheet is provided as a service by the Eczema Association of New Zealand Inc to give up-to-date, practical help on certain types of eczema or a particular aspect of its treatment. These Information Sheets are part of our membership package.

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