

Your Skin in Winter

Cold dry air outside, hot dry air inside. How to help your epidermis survive M.L. BREAM



Carol Johnson, a resident of Ottawa, hits the windswept slopes of Mont Tremblant every weekend once the snow flies, no matter how cold or blustery it gets. Carol bundles up seriously. From her helmet, goggles and fleece balaclava to the tip of her ski boots, almost every square inch of her body is protected from the elements. “I’ve had a few episodes of frostbite, so I cover up very well,” says the 64-year-old executive. But she can still come home from the mountain with dry, irritated winter skin.

“Dryness is the biggest issue for skin in the wintertime” says Dr. Ari Demirjian, an associate dermatologist at McGill University Health Centre in Montreal. “A lot of people continue to care for their skin the same way they did in the summer. That can create dry skin — or eczema, which is even drier, redder and itchier.”

There’s an easy way to tell when it’s time to switch to a winter skin-care regimen. “Your cue is when the heating kicks in,” says Demirjian. “Most types of heating dry up the environment,” he adds, and the problem is compounded by the cold dry air outdoors.

To soothe her mature skin in winter, Carol should consider switching from the daily showers she prefers to less frequent warm baths. In fact, washing less often in water that is less than hot is Demirjian’s primary tip for reducing

Cetaphil
Moisturizing
Cream
453 g, \$24.99



Cetraben
Emollient Cream
125 g, \$16.75
available at the
pharmacy counter



Cliniderm
Soothing
Cream
100 g, \$16



Impruv
Derma Membrane
Cream
150 mL, \$29.99



Lipikar
Baume
200 mL, \$23



Vaseline
Creamy
Problem Skin
Therapy
220 mL, \$6.49



Dermatologist's Picks

“Moisturizers work by trapping in moisture, not by adding it, so your skin should not be completely dried off after bathing, and moisturizer should be applied immediately,” says Dr. Ian Landells, medical director, dermatology, at Nexus Clinical Research Inc. and clinical chief of dermatology at Eastern Health in St. John’s, Nfld. He recommends using heavy unscented moisturizing creams (rather than light, watery lotions). See some of his suggestions above.

the skin’s seasonal dryness. “While it feels great in cold weather to take a long hot shower, hot water has a tendency to evaporate, thus drying out the skin,” he says. “In the long run, showering will dry out your skin more and can lead to eczema, but water doesn’t evaporate from your skin when you’re in the bath.”

Demirjian also suggests cutting back on soap, which exacerbates dryness and promotes eczema. (To care for the inflamed skin of eczema, see *Short Takes*, p. 9.) Apply soap strategically, only in the areas that really need it — under the arms and in the groin. “The rest of the body — unless it’s truly in need of serious cleansing for a good reason — is already drier in the wintertime, so avoid applying soap,” he says. Take it easy with shampoos, too, and scented body washes, both of which can be very dehydrating.

When it comes to the ingredients in creams and lotions, “less is more,” Demirjian says. For ordinary dry skin, he recommends “a bland, unscented moisturizer — the thicker the better.” For dry hands, he tells patients to wash their hands with cold to lukewarm water (not hot), and while they’re still wet, to apply a dab of petroleum jelly, a cheap and effective moisturizer that is free of preservatives, which can irritate skin.

As for drinking water to help keep the skin hydrated, Demirjian dismisses this. “I encourage people to drink water, but it will have


only a minimal impact on the skin overall. Water helps the skin when it is directly applied, not ingested.” As for using a humidifier to keep indoor air moist, that will help a bit, but it doesn’t have as much impact as washing less often.

People with extremely dry skin should carefully read the labels on their toiletries and avoid fragrances in particular, according to Dr. Sandy Skotnicki-Grant, a dermatologist at the Bay Dermatology Centre in Toronto.

“Fragrance is an unnecessary additive and a potential irritant,” she says. She recommends using unscented laundry detergents and dryer sheets as well as mild, fragrance-free beauty products for the face and body. In shampoos, check for the addition of botanicals such as mint, rosemary, lavender,

ylang-ylang, tea-tree oil and camomile, all of which can be irritating, she says. Surfactants, which create foam or lather, can also worsen dry skin. “One to avoid is cocoamidopropyl betaine,” writes Skotnicki-Grant on her website, www.baydermatologycentre.com.

Skotnicki-Grant recommends moisturizing your skin all over every day. And after bathing, pat, don’t rub, the skin with a towel, then apply a humectant to your still-damp skin. “It’s not a good idea to put a bath oil directly into the water. Besides being messy and leaving a tub ring, it’s dangerous and can lead to falls. I prefer to apply an oil after the bath.”

By following these few tips, Canadians should be better able to enjoy all that winter has to offer — indoors or out — while still feeling good in their own skin. 

Death Valley Indoors

It may feel like the North Pole outside, but inside your home it’s more like Death Valley’s desert clime. The humidity in a heated North American home can be as low as 6%. Even the sandy Sahara has more: 25% to 30%!

And this arid atmosphere may crack more than your skin. It can dry out your eyes and the linings of your sinuses, nose and throat, making you more susceptible to respiratory infections — not to mention cause the desiccating timbers of your house to creak and your fine rattan furniture to turn brittle.

— Diana Swift