

Don't let winter get under your skin

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Anyone who's endured a Wyoming winter knows those long, cold months tend to get under people's skin emotionally. As it turns out, winter can also physically get under your skin. [oas:jacksonholestartrib.com/features:Middle]

Winter conditions are notoriously hard on the skin. The wind sometimes blows for days, mercilessly buffeting exposed parts whenever we go outside.

The outside air sometimes seems dry enough to suck water out of a sponge. Inside air can be even drier.

All those conditions, and the lack of humidity in particular, often gang up to cause an exotic sounding malady called xerotic dermatitis, commonly known as dry skin.

Dr. Scott Bennion, of Medical Skin Care in Casper, said dry skin is the most common complaint dermatologists see in the winter.

"It's a physics thing," said Bennion. "Anything less than 60 percent humidity in the air your skin obligatorily loses water to the atmosphere. ... Inside in the winter, where most people are, the humidity is usually 20 percent or less. ... That's the main reason people have problems with dry skin in the wintertime."

Dry skin manifests itself as a rash, or cracked and scaly skin. It is often accompanied by an annoying persistent itch, which can feel like winter literally is under your skin.

But winter skin problems aren't limited to xerotic dermatitis.

Dr. Rowan Tichenor, of Casper Dermatology Clinic, said pre-existing skin diseases can also be aggravated by dry winter air.

"Winter can cause outbreaks of pre-existing skin problems, like psoriasis and eczema, and especially psoriasis because it is aggravated by dry skin," Tichenor said. "Eczemas can be worse in the winter, but a lot of times they're worse more in the summer when the pollens in the air are active."

Both dermatologists said the best way to avoid winter-skin problems is to maintain the body's natural defenses. Bennion said the skin has natural oils and acids to act as an envelope to keep moisture in the skin.

Unfortunately, the envelope can be washed away. As a result, many dermatologists strongly recommend adjusting bathing habits. Skincareguide.com recommends using unscented soaps, and to wash only the hands and armpits.

Bennion said he tells his patients to "not wash hardly at all. ... I advise them to use a mild soap, first of all, something that is not harsh. Those soaps are typically Dove, Oil of Olay, one of these soaps that promote themselves as being mild."

"I also advise people not to use deodorant soaps," he added. "The deodorant materials are actually extremely irritating to the skin and cause rashes. ... Also they kill natural bacteria that's on your skin, and when you wipe out your natural flora, then what happens is pathogenic bacteria can grow on your skin much more easily."

The Casper dermatologists recommend several other practices to maintain healthy skin during the winter:

* When you do bathe, apply oils to your skin. Tichenor favors olive oil, particularly for the middle-aged or seniors, because it contains ingredients that help "replenish natural oils."

Bennion said he prefers mineral oil, partly because there is no odor. Neither recommends commercial lotions.

Tichenor said apply the oil while the skin is still wet to keep in moisture.

"The horny layer of the skin, (the outermost layer of the epidermis) takes up moisture when we bathe, and then you put the oil on right over the wet skin, that tends to retain that moisture you took up while bathing," Tichenor said. "The other advantage of doing the oil over the wet skin, that disperses it better."

"Pat" dry your skin instead of rubbing it with a towel, Tichenor advises.

* Installing a humidifier in the home can also help. Bennion cautions, however, high humidity may cause other problems.

"The trouble with too much humidity is it causes mold to grow, and dust mites love humidity," he said. "Many people are allergic to mold and dust mites."

* Watch what you put in the washer and dryer. Tichenor said a commonly used method of fabric softening, for example, can be particularly irritating.

"The fabric softener sheets that go in the dryer ... can act like fiberglass on dry skin," Tichenor said.

* Don't forget to apply sunscreen when outside for extended periods of time. Tichenor said zinc-based sunscreens are preferable because they reflect the sun's rays.

"A lot of people forget you need a sunscreen in the winter months, especially if they're up in the mountains," said Tichenor. "There's a lot of reflection off the snow and people do get some significant damage in the winter months."

Bennion said a water softener can also help, because hard water is "hard on skin," and the real key to not letting winter get under skin is in the bath or shower.

"It's a pretty simple regimen," Bennion said. "Don't overwash, use a mild soap, wash where you need to wash, and replace the body oils."