

Winter Skin Care

Cold, winter winds are blowing hard. This, coupled with the warm but dry air can create havoc on our skin. Irritated skin affects many when the air is cold and dry, but it is also a symptom of other skin conditions such as eczema (topical dermatitis), contact dermatitis (or allergic reactions), psoriasis, acne or rosacea. Certain medications such as aspirin, radiation or chemotherapy agents, some blood pressure medications and drugs used to treat severe acne can all cause irritated skin. People with diabetes, hypothyroidism, depression and lupus are also more susceptible to dry, itchy skin.

Irritated skin is a breakdown of the skin's protective barrier or stratum corneum. It is the body's first line of defense against bacteria, chemicals and UV rays. It also helps to maintain moisture. By keeping the skin healthy, the need for stronger, prescription treatments to care for eczema or rosacea may be lessened or eliminated. Some oral therapies used for severe acne are more effective and have fewer side-effects when accompanied by good skin care.

Proper care of irritated or "sensitive" skin is essential. Untreated skin can become red, itchy and inflamed. In more severe cases, unsightly skin can be embarrassing. Following a few simple steps can ensure that your skin looks and feels its best all year round.

1. **Cleansing:** It is necessary to remove the day's buildup of sweat, debris, oil and bacteria. Be sure to use a mild cleanser that is soap free and water soluble. Regular soap may remove too much of the skin's natural, protective oils, changing the pH and leaving the skin more vulnerable to irritation. Cleanse gently, being careful not to scrub too hard or too much. Avoid products with exfoliants. Rinse the skin well and pat dry.
2. **Moisturize:** Applying a moisturizer helps to repair damage from the elements and restore the skin's ability to hold and maintain moisture. A good moisturizer will decrease water loss from the skin and trap water in the stratum corneum. Apply the moisturizer after cleansing while the skin is damp. This helps to hold in the moisture. Avoid medicated creams or lotions such as those with retin A or AHA (alpha hydroxyl acid). Choose a light, non-comedogenic, non-greasy cream for the face or acne prone skin. A heavier version works well on the rest of the body.
3. **Sunscreen:** This step I can't stress enough. We have heard time and time again about the damage that UV rays cause our skin...much of which cannot be reversed. Be sure to choose a product that is broad-spectrum (UVA and UVB), has a minimum SPF (sun protection factor) of 30 and that is photostable (not broken down by the sun's rays). Apply sunscreen to exposed skin daily, even in the cold winter months. If you find a product that is suitable, you may be able to combine steps 2 and 3.

When choosing your skin care products, be sure to look for products that are specially formulated for sensitive skin. These cleansers and moisturizers will be free of fragrances, dyes and irritants. Be careful with "hypoallergenic" products. This doesn't mean you

won't react to them, but that the ingredients that typically irritate skin have been removed.

During the winter months, it's also important to increase the humidity in the house by the use of a humidifier, on its own or attached to the furnace. Avoid daily, long, hot baths which are drying to the skin. Opt for shorter, warm showers instead. Be sure to drink plenty of water and try adding some fish oils to your diet.

Keep your skin soft and moist all year round. Talk to your pharmacist about the skin care regimen that is best for you.