

[Ask The Expert]



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I'm sure many of you have noticed that your skin has become itchy since the recent cold wave hit our area. Our "snowbird" friends from up North are quite familiar with this phenomenon they call "winter itch."

Are they bringing with them some exotic disease, or is it related to the cold weather that drives (and often follows) them here?

"Winter itch" is a common skin problem that is triggered by cold weather. The problem is much greater in colder climates where they use more heat and the humidity is lower. Nonetheless, it also occurs in the South, especially when these more severe cold waves pass through.

Recently, I observed in many of my patients the telltale signs of winter itch characterized by dry skin, most notable on the lower legs and the arms, dry and cracked nail cuticles, chapped lips and many scratch marks. When queried, they all complained of itchy skin.

The cause of winter itch is well known. It is due to rapid and excessive dryness of the skin that occurs as winter descends upon us. During winter the humidity is lower; when the heat is on, the warm circulating air tends to dry the skin further. Simply remember how dry your skin got the last time you traveled North in the winter!

Moreover, when it's cold outside many of you love to take a long, hot shower or bath — but this can actually aggravate your condition. What happens is that your waterlogged skin dries out due to the effects of evaporation, which is accelerated as the humidity decreases and the

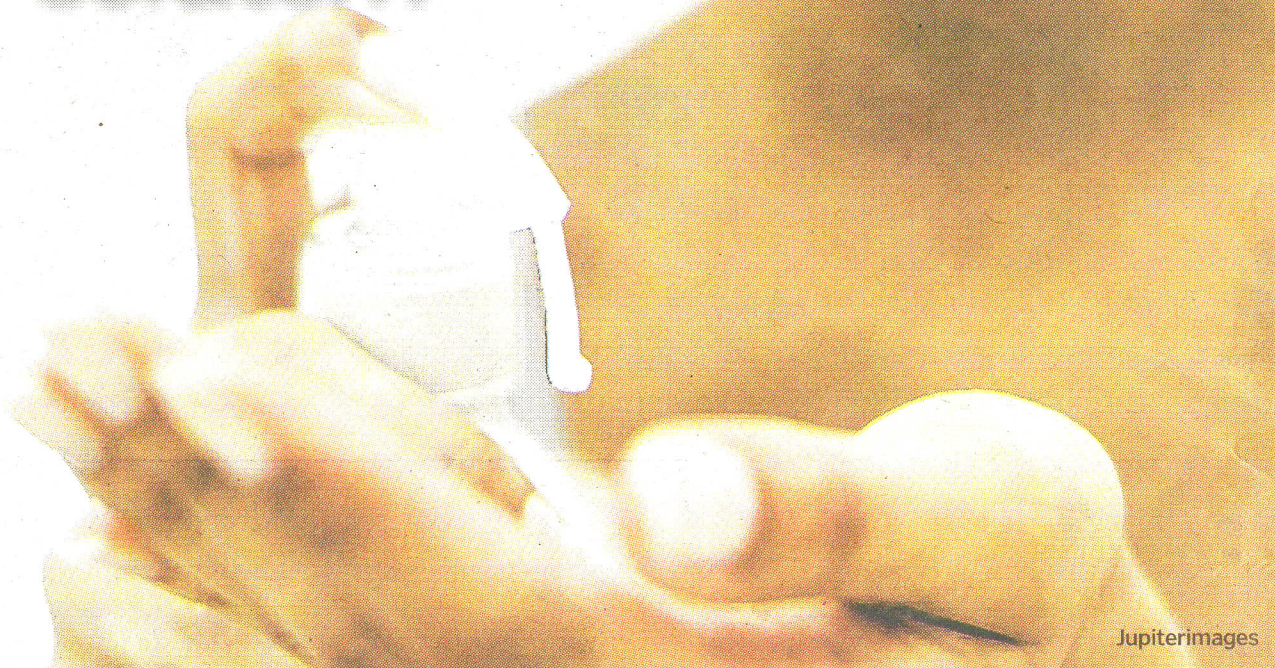
household heat increases. Since evaporation is a drying process, it is imperative to prevent it by applying a moisturizer within five minutes of towel drying. That will lock in the residual moisture.

Over time this will rehydrate your skin as well. If winter itch gets out of hand, your skin can become inflamed, resulting in "xerotic" eczema. The process is much worse if you have preexisting dry skin due to aging or atopic eczema (a common skin disorder characterized by sensitive skin associated with asthma and hay fever).

Here are some tips to prevent and/or treat "winter itch"

- Turn down the thermostat.
- Avoid hot showers and baths (they degrease the skin).

Which winter itch remedies are up to scratch?



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- Limit bathing to five to 10 minutes (less water, less evaporation).
- Use super-fatted soaps (fewer suds) or, better yet, soap-free cleansers.
- Pat dry and immediately apply a moisturizer while skin is still wet!
- Moisten and reapply moisturizer as necessary.
- Avoid irritating clothing (wool).
- If the skin is inflamed, apply 1 percent hydrocortisone cream, available over the counter.
- If the condition doesn't resolve, see your dermatologist!

What do I look for in a moisturizer?

- It doesn't have to be expensive to be good! (Same ingredients, different packaging.)
- Heavier is better. (Less water-less

drying via evaporation)

- Fragrance-free is better (Avoids allergens)
- Basic moisturizers are petrolatum based with emulsifiers. (They trap water in the skin by occlusion. Cost effective!)
- Enhanced moisturizers contain alpha hydroxyl acids, urea and hyaluronic acids. (They hold water in the skin and help normalize the damaged epidermis.)
- Pure petrolatum lip balms are best. (The more ingredients, the greater the risk for allergies.)

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