

SKIN CARE FOR WINTER SKIN, NAILS, AND HAIR

It feels like winter, even in Austin. Though a relief from the high heat and humidity of the rest of the year, how can we protect ourselves from the drying effects of this season to keep our hair, skin, and nails healthy?

During the cool, low-humidity weather, we lose more moisture to the outside air just from diffusion and evaporation through moisture and temperature gradients. This loss of moisture is called transepidermal water loss (TEWL) and is a measure of the function of our skin barrier. Aside from temperature and humidity changes, aging, certain medications and genetic conditions can speed up our TEWL. Luckily, a few basic easy tricks can lock that moisture back in to prevent our skin, hair, and nails from looking and feeling cracked, rough, and lackluster.

The outermost layer of our skin and our entire visible portion of our hair and nail units are non-living. For skin, the “bricks” are made of a dead skin cells made mainly of a protein called keratin. The “mortar” of these keratin sheets is composed of lipids – ceramides, cholesterol, free fatty acids, etc - with complex chemical bonds with other proteins. Thus, our skin, even the outside “dead” layer, is composed of a complex interlocking of lipids, keratin, and other organic and inorganic chemicals to maintain proper water content, pH balance, and function.

Skin keeps our body temperature and water/salt homeostasis in check. Great skin also makes us look healthy and vital and younger. When skin dries, most people start to feel itchy or have pain from cracks in skin; hair can be unmanageable with much static, and nails will crack from being brittle. We are not talking life-and-death medical issues here, but for those who’ve ever had bad dry skin itching, it can keep someone up many hours in the night from the discomfort.

The treatment is moisturizing right? Yes...but which one to choose? There are moisturizers, emollients, humectants, occlusive agents or greases, and lubricants. There are also lotions, creams, ointments, oils, etc. The former set either keep moisture locked in or attract water back into the layers of skin and nails to keep it supple. The latter set has to do with the consistency of the topical and how well they can hydrate, cool, and/or deliver medication to the skin.

You do not have to spend much to get adequate moisturizing. Home remedies can include placing olive oil or safflower oil on skin on for multiple nights. But if you don’t want to smell like cooking oil, choose something that you won’t mind using consistently. For instance, choose a moisturizer that is light in the summer such as a lotion and heavier in the winter such as a cream. As Dermatologists, we recommend heavier creams or ointments for those with very dry skin or eczema (dry, rashy skin).

Also, Dermatologists prefer patients to use fragrance-free products because the fragrance, though it smells great, can often be a skin sensitizer. "Unscented" just means the manufacturer used a second fragrance to mask another fragrance, so beware.

Moisturizing is more than half the battle, but what about the rest? Use a mild, moisturizing fragrance-free soap or cleanser and take shorter, lukewarm water showers or baths. Long, hot showers can actually promote water loss from skin. Gently pat dry your skin with a soft towel. Apply moisturizer to skin and nails immediately (within three minutes) after bathing and occasionally throughout the day. Avoid wool or harsh fiber clothing directly on skin as well. Use fragrance free detergents, without fabric softeners if possible, as the latter often have strong chemicals. Lastly, consider purchasing a humidifier if your environment tends to be dry (this will also decrease hair static).

As for drinking lots of water to keep your skin hydrated, the medical consensus is mixed. Water can improve internal organ function but that consumed water may not necessarily be transmitted to skin cells unless the person is extremely dehydrated. But it can't hurt either drinking that daily 64 oz of water in healthy people.

Roopal Bhatt, MD is a Dermatologist starting practice in the Four Points Area. For more information or questions, e-mail her at contact@fourpointsdermatology.com or visit www.fourpointsdermatology.com.