

Self-Care Corner

Winter itch

All winter flakes are not made of snow. Cold weather, with its low relative humidity, wreaks havoc on your skin, making it dry and flaky. Skin dries out if it's deprived of moisture, and this dryness often aggravates itchiness, resulting in a condition commonly referred to as "winter itch." During the winter the air is drier, and indoor heating further robs your skin of moisture. Fortunately, there are several ways that you can replenish the water content of your skin.

Dr. Robyn Gmyrek, a dermatologist and director of the Skin and Laser Center at New York–Presbyterian Hospital/Columbia University Medical Center, suggests the following skin advice:

- **Moisturize daily.** Petrolatum or cream-based moisturizers are far better than lotions for normal to dry skin. If you have sensitive skin, choose a moisturizer without fragrance or lanolin. After bathing, apply moisturizer directly to your wet skin to ensure that the moisturizer can help to trap surface moisture.
- **Limit the use of hot water and soap.** If you have "winter itch," take short lukewarm showers or baths with a non-irritating, non-detergent-based cleanser. Immediately afterward, apply a thick cream or a petroleum-jelly-type moisturizer. Gently pat skin dry.
- **Humidify.** Dry air can pull the moisture from your skin. Room humidifiers can be very helpful. However, be sure to clean the unit and change the water according to the manufacturer's instructions to reduce mold and fungi.
- **Protect yourself from the wind.** Cover your face and use a petrolatum-based balm for your lips.
- **Protect your skin from the sun.** Remember that winter sun can also be dangerous to the skin. Even in the winter months you should use a sunscreen with a sun-protection factor of 15 or greater if you will be outdoors for prolonged periods.
- **Avoid winter tanning.** Tanning beds and artificial sunlamps are always damaging to your skin and increase your risk of skin cancer.
- **Take vitamin D supplements.** During the summer months your natural vitamin D production increases due to daily sun exposure, but when winter rolls around that exposure decreases. Taking vitamin supplements can ensure that you are getting the recommended amounts of vitamin D all year.

