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When winter gets under your skin

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Though today's the first day of winter, your skin probably already feels like the season's been under way for weeks.

While summer's threat to the skin from sunburns and bug bites is obvious and known, winter's threat is more subtle.

"Cold air saps moisture from your skin because there's less humidity in it, as does indoor heat," says Annette Sandford-Lopez, director of The Spa at Charleston Place. "Those are two things that rob your skin of hydration."

Maintaining healthy skin in the winter, according to Dr. Todd Schlesinger of the Dermatology and Laser Center of Charleston, partly requires people to understand the "differing needs of the skin on the face, scalp or hands and feet as compared to the rest of the body."

The key to taking care of your skin, the largest organ of your body, is to follow an array of strategies to maintain its moisture. Sandford-Lopez, whose experience includes two decades with Estee Lauder Spas, and Schlesinger offered the following tips for winter skin care.

Go easy on showers

"The average person showers too much in the winter, and even in the summer," says Schlesinger. "Showering in general is not a bad thing, but excessively hot water and harsh soaps can strip the skin of its essential barrier functions. This exposes the skin to the elements and allows allergens, bacteria and water to penetrate below the protective outer layers."

Showers, Schlesinger says, should be shorter (no longer than five to 10 minutes), and despite the temptation for a hot shower, go for a warm or cooler shower.

Bar the harsh soaps

Schlesinger and Sandford-Lopez say people, particularly those with dry skin, should stay

away from soaps and cleansers that contain strong fragrances. Use mild soaps or nonsoap cleansers. Schlesinger recommends CeraVe liquid cleanser or Avene Trixera cleansing gel.

Quick, moisturize

After showers or baths, blot skin gently with a towel and then put on a "moisturizer," which actually acts as a barrier to keep moisture in the skin. "As soon as you get out of the shower, within three minutes, put on your moisturizer from head-to-toe," says Sandford-Lopez, saying that common brands such as Neutrogena, Vaseline and Eucerin often are sufficient. "Apply it all over your body, but concentrate on your elbows and knees."

Add some 'oomph'

Sandford-Lopez also recommends applying a serum before putting on moisturizer.

"It is not necessary to change your moisturizer if it's working for you," she says. "All you need to do is add a little oomph by adding a moisturizing serum, such as a vitamin C or hyaluronic acid, under your moisturizer."

TLC for eyes and lips

These areas are different and deserve special treatment.

For the areas around the eyes, Sandford-Lopez says a finer moisturizer, such as an eye cream, should be used in the eye-socket area. Lips are prone to chapping because of the tendency to lick them when they are dry, which makes them drier. Lip balms, featuring petroleum, glycerin or shea butter, should be used on the lips. For women, brightly colored lipsticks work well, but avoid "long-lasting" lipsticks because those have less emollients and can actually dry lips.

Hands & feet

One of the keys to avoiding colds is washing your hands -- frequently. Unfortunately, that also can dry them out.

Sandford-Lopez says to avoid harsh, anti-bacterial soaps and to keep a moisturizer on your desk, or any other common work site, and by sinks to use immediately after washing hands. Also, wear gloves outdoors.

For the other extremities, Sandford-Lopez urges a home treatment one to three times a week (depending on how dry your feet are) that involves soaking your feet in Epsom salt for 10 to 15 minutes, then applying a "greasier" moisturizer on your feet and putting on cotton socks to be worn overnight.

Inside and out

Drinking sufficient amounts of water, generally about 2 to 2 1/2 liters per day, is good for all functions of the body, including your skin.

Sandford-Lopez also recommends consuming omega-3 fatty acids, such as those found in cold-water fish (wild-caught salmon, mackerel, sardines) or in fish oil.

Schlesinger says the most important vitamins and minerals for the skin include biotin, zinc, selenium and vitamins C, A, K and E, though most can be obtained by eating a healthy diet.

Be gone, dead skin

Dead skin is not good and needs to be removed for moisturizers to be effective.

Sandford-Lopez recommends using an exfoliant, featuring salicylic acid, during showers to remove built-up skin from head-to-toe. Concentrate on elbows, knees and the back.

"Otherwise, you're just putting moisturizer on dead skin."

She also recommends using a gentle exfoliating brush, such as the Clarisonic Pro, to do the job.

Not just for sick kids

Say "humidifier" and many will think of Mom putting Vicks VapoRub on your chest and turning on a humidifier.

Despite the bad rap humidifiers have received (because ones that aren't kept clean can produce mold), Sandford-Lopez and Schlesinger say a well-maintained humidifier can help keep skin from drying out in the winter when indoor heating takes too much humidity out of the air.

"Humidity between 30 and 50 percent is ideal," says Schlesinger. "When it gets in the 20 percent or lower, it's dry."

The head game

"Lackluster hair is not uncommon in winter," says Sandford-Lopez. "Use less abrasive shampoo and a good, deep conditioner with silicone to lock down the outer cuticle layer, to seal in moisture and help tame static cling. ... If the scalp is dry and flaky, try using Moroccan oil in your dry hair and comb it through the ends. Do it at night and leave it overnight."