

Winter Itch or Xerotic Eczema

Alias “Safeguard Syndrome”

“Why do I itch? — I bathe twice a day!”

What Is It?

Dry winter weather and excess bathing can bring dry, itchy skin, especially on the arms, legs, and sides of one’s body. Red rashes can appear, looking blotchy, scaly, and progressing to raised dried brawny-colored patches. Skin lines become accentuated and fine cracking can occur.

What Causes It?

Indoor heating dries the air inside buildings. In winter people often take hotter baths and showers and stay in them longer to warm up. Many don’t drink enough fluids. When the air surrounding the skin is drier, water evaporates out more easily, drying the skin. This makes you feel cold, so you may crank up the heat, further drying the air!

Natural protective skin oil is dissolved and washed away by the use of strong soaps, especially deodorant soaps, such as Coast, Irish Spring, Safeguard, Shield, Lever 2000, and Zest. Some people also become allergic to these and the rash worsens. Dry skin is more sensitive and easily irritated; it gets itchy, then scratching that itch can actually *cause* a rash. It becomes “the itch that rashes”!

The skin may become so dry and irritated that it is open to the ever-present microscopic invaders, resulting in impetigo (bacterial oozing, crusty infection) or “ringworm” (round spots with scaly, thicker edge and central clearing, caused by fungus.)

Another cause of further irritation is an allergic or chemical reaction to fabric softeners remaining in pillowcases or clothing; the treated dryer sheets seem to be more troublesome than the liquid fabric softeners.

What Do I Do?

Bathe less often! It is better to wash only once every day or two in winter, and showering is preferred, as it is less drying than a tub bath. Use warm, not hot water, and stay in for no longer than 10-15 minutes. Avoid deodorant soaps if you get rashes. Some recommended bar soaps are Camay, Caress, Jergens, Pure and Natural.



Don’t feel you have to lather and scrub all parts of your body each time - a water rinse will do just fine for most areas if you are just sweaty from exercising. Try using the mild soap only in vital areas such as the armpit, buttocks and genitals. And rinse well! Soap left on the skin may further irritate and dry.

After rinsing, apply a moisturizer all over your body while it’s still wet. Avoid moisturizers that contain alcohol, as they can actually dry the skin more.

How Can I Prevent It?

Re-apply your moisturizer repeatedly through the day to keep your skin from getting dry.

Don’t overheat your environment. Use a humidifier or set out pans of water to moisten your air. Also drink extra water to humidify from the inside out. Avoid dehydration caused by drinking alcohol and by neglecting to replace fluids lost through sweating.

Use a sunscreen cream on exposed areas if going out in the sun, even in winter.

If your dry skin or rash isn’t better in a week or so, or if it contains pustules, is oozing, or looks like ringworm, see your health care provider.

