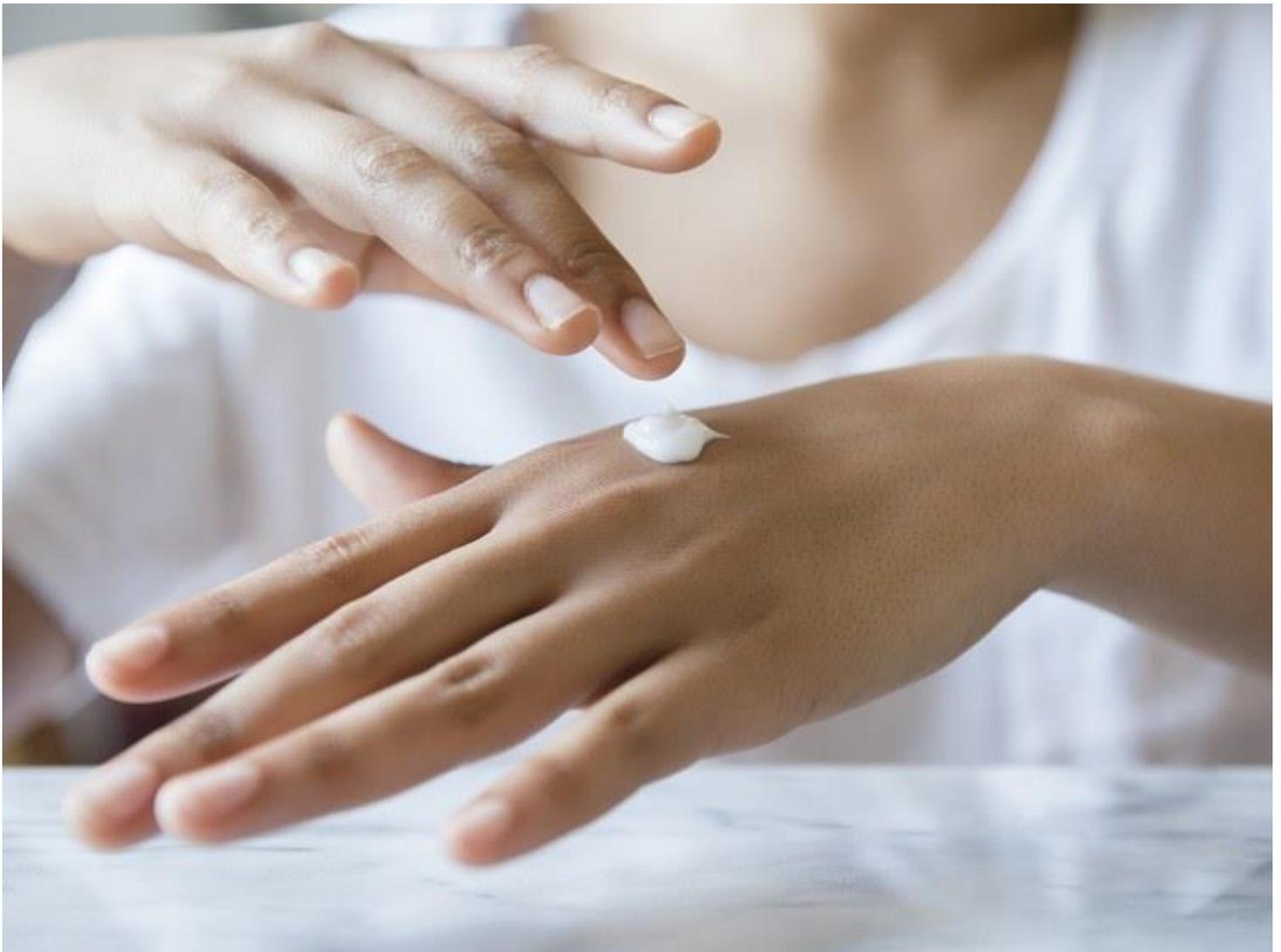


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How to Know When Your Dry Skin Is Actually Eczema

Read on if your skin could make a desert jealous.



If your dry skin makes you think you might be half-alligator, you may be curious about eczema. Eczema (also known as atopic dermatitis), can make your skin dry and itchy—but there’s actually a lot separating typical dry skin from this irritating chronic condition.

There are times when it’s completely normal for anyone’s skin to feel super dry, Cynthia Bailey, M.D., a diplomate of the American Board of Dermatology and founder of Dr. Bailey Skin Care, tells SELF. For instance, if you’ve been out in cold, windy weather, haven’t been drinking enough water lately, or haven’t used lotion in so long you barely remember what it is, you may experience dry skin as a result. The issue is that eczema can make your skin completely overreact to these triggers—or become dry and inflamed for *seemingly* no reason. This reaction comes down to your skin’s protective barrier.

Eczema happens because of a skin barrier dysfunction that makes your top layer of skin unable to properly retain moisture and protect you from things like irritants, allergens, and environmental elements, according to the Mayo Clinic. This can result in inflammation that leads to dry, irritated skin, Joshua Zeichner, M.D., a New York City-based and board-certified dermatologist, tells SELF.

But how do you tell the difference between “regular” dry skin and the type that might be due to eczema? Here’s what to keep in mind.

First up: Eczema actually isn’t just about dryness. It typically comes with an itchy, red or otherwise discolored rash, too.

If your skin is dry, it’s probably going to be a little itchy at some point. But itchiness from eczema can be a whole other ball game. Depending on how severe your eczema is, the itching can be intense and constant, even pulling the unfair move of feeling worse when you try to go to sleep. (After you’ve wrapped up your day, there’s less stuff to distract you from the itching sensation, Dr. Bailey explains.)

The itching may also come along with a rash of red or brown patches in a few key areas of your body. These patches are most likely to show up on your hands, feet, ankles, wrists, neck, upper chest, eyelids, and inside the bends of your elbows and knees, according to the Mayo Clinic. Or you might have small, raised bumps that itch, then weep fluid and crust over when you scratch them.

It might feel irresistible to attack your eczema with your nails, but try not to. “Scratching tends to only make it worse,” Holly Gunn, M.D., an assistant professor of dermatology at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, tells SELF. Instead, if you do indeed have eczema, your doctor can advise you about which anti-itch cream might be right for you. It could be a prescription corticosteroid cream to combat inflammation, or it might be an over-the-counter hydrocortisone cream to do the same, according to the Mayo Clinic.

If you have eczema, your skin might go through alternating periods of calm and upset based on various triggers.

Eczema is a chronic condition, but different things can make it worse. Since eczema is associated with health issues like asthma and hay fever, it’s no surprise that all three conditions have some similar triggers, like pollen,

mold, dust mites, pet dander, cold and dry air, having a cold or the flu, being exposed to irritating chemicals or fabrics, stress, and fragrances.

Some other factors can also make eczema worse, like taking a long, steaming-hot shower and not moisturizing your skin well afterwards, according to the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID). While that might make anyone's skin feel tight and uncomfortable, people with eczema can experience a serious symptom flare-up due to their frail skin barriers, Dr. Bailey says.

If you have eczema, you might also notice that using certain soaps when you shower or wash your hands results in worse symptoms. (This can even happen with your shampoo, because yes, you can get eczema on your scalp.) This is because fragrant, antibacterial, or otherwise harsh products can wash away too much of your skin's natural moisture, according to the Mayo Clinic.

You should reach for gentle soaps and shampoos if your skin gets irritated easily, whether or not you have eczema, Joshua Zeichner, M.D., a New York City-based board-certified dermatologist, tells SELF. Look for ones that have as few fragrances, alcohols, and dyes as possible.

You should also take note if moisturizers don't quench your skin's thirst as well as they should.

Creams, ointments, and lotions help seal moisture into your skin, making it less dry in the process, the Mayo Clinic explains. But if you have eczema, skin irritation, dryness, and itching can still persist even after using your garden-variety moisturizer, **Gary Goldenberg, M.D.**, assistant clinical professor of dermatology at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, tells SELF.

That doesn't mean you should just skip this step if you have eczema—it's the exact opposite, because your skin desperately needs the moisture. You may just need to pick your moisturizer wisely and apply it more often. Moisturizing your skin two to three times a day with heavy ointments like petroleum jelly may help, the NIAID says. Much like your soap, your moisturizers should be free of alcohol, scents, dyes, and other skin-irritating chemicals. You might even consider getting a humidifier to keep more moisture in the air at your home. But if you've followed these guidelines and your skin is still parched, irritated, and generally giving you grief, it's time to see a doctor.

Whether you know you have eczema for a fact or just suspect you have the skin condition, it's really a good idea to talk to a dermatologist to come up with an individualized treatment plan that works for you, Dr. Gunn says. While there's no cure for eczema, there are plenty of treatments that can keep dry skin and itchiness at bay.