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The dry facts

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(KRT) - You may be just uncomfortable, or you could be on your way to a real problem. We asked people in the know how to care for skin in winter.

Esthetician Amanda Kennedy has been noticing more stress in clients this time of year. She sees it in their skin.

"In the Midwest, we go from a warm house to the cold outside," says Kennedy, of Solimar Wellness Spa in Eagan. "If you're not protecting your skin enough, it tends to get dry and stripped."

Weighing about 6 pounds, the skin is the body's largest organ. Just as clay can dry up, so can our skin, especially in winter. If it dries out, it can cause micro-cracks and fissures. That can lead to irritation and itchiness and open the door for fungus, bacteria and other germs to invade the body.

"Dry, cold weather is an absolute enemy to the skin," says Dr. Charles E. Crutchfield III, clinical associate professor of dermatology at the University of Minnesota and owner of Crutchfield Dermatology in Eagan. "The good news is that it is so easily treated."

The Pioneer Press asked people who know about skin for their suggestions on the best ways to care for skin during the winter. Here are some of their recommendations:

_ Stay hydrated. Hydration must come from internal and external sources, Crutchfield says. Drink four to six glasses of water a day. A shower or bath hydrates the skin well, but once you're done, it's important to seal in the moisture with lotion. "Most people don't do that," Crutchfield says. "Get out, towel off. The air is dry, hydration is evaporated."

_ Use a good cleanser and a good moisturizer. Crutchfield recommends a nondetergent cleanser without preservatives or fragrances. His suggestions: Vanicream, Cetaphil and, in a pinch, Dove unscented. "When you cleanse, you don't want to take away the natural oils, just the soil," Crutchfield says. For a protective barrier on the skin, he recommends Vanicream, Aveeno and Neutrogena with sesame oil.

_ Consider medicated treatments for conditions like dry, cracked heels. Crutchfield tells patients to soak their feet in warm water for three to four minutes, apply Eucerin Plus Intensive Repair Creme and Lotion, put on heavy cotton socks and go to bed. Amlactin, a heavy-duty moisture binding cream, is good for the hands, arms and legs.

_ For outdoor activities, have a game plan. Use a gentle moisturizer on the face. Use lip protection with SPF-15 or higher and UV-blocking sunglasses. Protect all vulnerable areas or risk frostbite. Mella Martin, founder of Mella Skin Care and Massage in St. Paul, gives a thumbs-up to SPF-30 for skiers, snowboarders and others whose skin takes a beating.

_ Reduce stress. Martin tells people to create a soothing routine and environment at home. She's a big fan of aromatherapy - specifically baths infused with a few drops of lavender or chamomile (be careful not to use too much oil, though, or risk irritation). She also recommends a humidifier and plants in the bedroom. "Creating a 'space' makes a big difference," Martin says. "You'll wake up feeling less dehydrated."

_ Practice this routine daily. Anticipate seasonal changes 30 days in advance, Martin says. That's how long it takes for skin cells to make it to the surface. "It's a good thing to anticipate what's coming," she says. "In the winter, people tend to forget what you were doing in June won't work in January."

ONLINE:

_ Crutchfield Dermatology: www.crutchfelddermatology.com

_ Mella Skin Care and Massage: www.mellaskincare.com

_ Solimar Wellness Spa: www.solimarspa.com

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