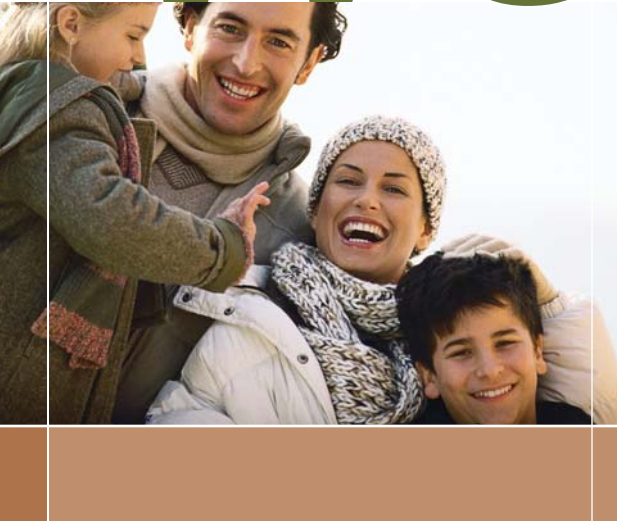


# Wellness EMPLOYEE report



## Itchiness...it goes skin deep

Many people don't realize that in the winter the warm air inside homes and other buildings can do more damage to a person's skin than the cold air outside. When the relative humidity inside drops below 60 per cent, skin loses most of its moisture into the air, leading to the itchiness that irritates so many people each winter. The dry and toasty indoors might be a welcome reprieve from the cold, but it can wreak havoc on your hide. And while we can't do anything about the changing seasons, we should make a few simple lifestyle changes to help offset the effects of the winter air and protect our skin from the elements indoors and out.

### Just scratching at the symptoms

Skin, the largest and most exposed organ in the human body, is made up of layers of cells. The **epidermis** is the top layer of skin and, along with oil glands, it produces **lipids** (fatty substances). Lipids help retain the skin's natural moisture and keep it soft and supple. That said, our skin is always losing moisture into the air, and every time we wash or bathe, we strip away lipids, letting more moisture evaporate. In humid conditions our skin can replenish itself by absorbing moisture from the air, but that's not the case when the humidity drops in the winter. Dehydrated skin is almost inevitable when you consider the combined effects of indoor heating, hot showers, baths and low humidity.

Finding out whether there's an underlying cause of your itchy skin (beyond the environmental elements of winter) is important for long-term relief from itching. If it's not accompanied by other obvious skin changes – such as a rash – itchy skin (**pruritus**) is most often caused by dry skin (**xerosis**). Otherwise, itchy skin can have hundreds of possible causes, and so if the itch you have sticks around and does not respond to self-care steps such as a cool bath, or if it disrupts your daily routine, you should consult your family physician. Through examination and tests, your doctor may determine that your itching is, in fact, a symptom of another skin condition. Skin rashes, drug reactions, allergic reactions, and pregnancy are just some examples of things that can cause intense itching.

Have you ever wondered, "What's an itch, and why does it feel so good to scratch?" Learn the answer at [www.health.howstuffworks.com/question600.htm](http://www.health.howstuffworks.com/question600.htm)

## Some common conditions that are accompanied by dry skin and itching

**Eczema (or Dermatitis)** is a chronic inflammation of the skin. There are different types of eczema, and it may have many causes, but typically it appears on the hands and involves dryness and itchiness with a rash and reddened skin. It most often affects infants and young children, and can continue into adulthood, or even begin to appear later in life.

**Psoriasis** is a condition where the life cycle of skin cells speeds up, resulting in a rapid buildup of rough, dead skin cells. It begins with little red bumps that gradually grow larger and become flaky. Psoriasis will quite often appear in the same area on both sides of the body, including the elbows, knees, groin and genitals, arms, legs, palms, soles, scalp and face. While the surface skin flakes off easily and often, the flakes below the surface tend to stick together and form sensitive lesions that are likely to bleed. Approximately 80 million people worldwide – including one million Canadians – have psoriasis, which can appear at any age.

**Rosacea** is a skin disease that causes redness, pimples, and red lines or a rash on the nose, cheeks, chin, and forehead. People sometimes call it “adult acne” because it can cause pimple-like outbreaks. Rosacea can also cause burning and soreness and is potentially serious near the eyes and eyelids. Triggers can include alcohol, stress, spicy foods, sun exposure, and extremes in surrounding temperature. Rosacea is most likely to affect women who are fair-skinned and between the ages of 30 and 60 years old.

## Keeping your skin up to scratch

- To combat the effects of dry skin, apply heavier cream moisturizers at least twice a day during the winter, especially after bathing. Using a moisturizing body wash during the shower and applying moisturizer within three minutes of your shower or bath can help trap water in the upper layers of the skin. Avoid foaming cleansers that strip the skin of more natural moisture, and look for moisturizing products that contain any of the following ingredients: *petrolatum, mineral oil, linoleic acid, ceramides, dimethicone, glycerin.*
  - Use a milder soap that is fragrance-free or one that contains moisturizing ingredients like oils and vitamins.
- Be aware that products that act as exfoliants tend to strip the top layer of the skin, leaving it unprotected to battle elements such as the winter wind.
- Wash your face with lukewarm water and resist the urge to soak in a tub of hot water because prolonged exposure to hot water is drying and even room-temperature water can be damaging to the skin if you submerge yourself for over an hour.
  - Continue to wear sunscreen in the winter. Snow can reflect more than 80 per cent of the sun’s ultraviolet radiation, so it’s important to always wear an SPF of 15 or higher on any exposed skin, including applying a lip
- balm of 15 or higher to prevent chapped lips.
- Be conscious of seasonal bulky layers and scarves, and the friction from rough winter fabrics that can irritate your skin. The less your skin is exposed to wind and chills, the fewer opportunities it will have to lose moisture. But don’t bundle up so tightly that your skin is prevented from breathing altogether.
  - Use a humidifier to add moisture to the air and combat the dry heat blasting in homes and offices in the winter. Dry heat can augment winter dryness and worsen skin conditions.

In the summer, we correctly focus a great deal of attention on protecting our skin by wearing sunscreen, sun hats and keeping hydrated. Yet we very often neglect taking similar precautions for our skin in the winter. Whether dealing with the effects of winter air or the itchiness and dryness of a chronic skin condition, some simple lifestyle and skin care changes can go a long way to help you protect your skin’s health and appearance.

Sources: Canadian Dermatology Association ([www.dermatology.ca](http://www.dermatology.ca)); YAHOO Health ([health.yahoo.com](http://health.yahoo.com)); American Academy of Dermatology ([www.aad.org](http://www.aad.org)); Ontario Department of Health ([www.healthyonario.com](http://www.healthyonario.com)).



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