

Greasy lotions are good for dry skin

Your best time to use petroleum jelly or any other thick cream or ointment is within the first two minutes after you jump out of the shower, says Coker. Before drying off, rub a thin film of petroleum jelly into your wet skin, then pat (not rub) dry with a towel.

"It takes some trial and error, but this is a wonderful way to lock moisture back into your skin, and the jelly creates a barrier over your skin."

And if your favorite time of the day is 30 minutes in the steamy shower, you're harming your skin even more. Your skin has a natural barrier — that dead layer of skin cells mixed with lipids (fats, or natural oils) to reduce moisture loss, according to Coker. This shield can't always withstand repeated exposure to soap and water. Harsh detergent soaps are the worst, because they strip away your skin's natural oils.

But you should also avoid smothering yourself in soaps labeled "moisturizing" because they, too, can dry your skin when used in excess.

"Add mechanical scrubbing with washcloths and loofas and you've basically done more harm than good," says Coker.

Limit your time in the shower or bath to 5 to 10 minutes.

Get more help

■ For more tips on year-round skin care and skin-related problems, visit the American Academy of Dermatology online at www.aad.org

■ If you experience worsening or persistent skin problems, consult your family physician or a dermatologist. ■

During winter, use soap only where necessary — arm pits, groin and face — especially if you are prone to dry skin.

If your house is dry from running the furnace, use a humidifier according to directions that come with it. Or, simply place a pot filled with water somewhere in our home or apartment. That water will evaporate and add moisture to the air in your rooms.

And, even though you aren't as thirsty during February as you are in July, drink plenty of water to keep your body hydrated. You may still experience dry skin, but the extra fluids will benefit your overall health.

When your hands stay in lots of water or you work with household cleaners and chemicals, wear latex or vinyl gloves

to protect your skin.

Waterless sanitizers are now popular options to washing your hands, and studies show they do a better job of cleaning your hands than soap and water, according to Coker. But they, too, can break down your skin's protective barrier.

When you go outdoors in the snow, use a sunscreen because the snow reflects and doubles your dose of harmful ultraviolet light.

Here again, a light layer of petroleum jelly on your cheeks and any other exposed areas of your face can guard your skin.

"Winter sun can burn and damage your skin as much as summer sun," says Kent Williard, a family physician in Newport News.

When you're prone to nosebleeds in the winter, use a cotton swab to apply a thin film of petroleum jelly inside your nasal passages.

Some over-the-counter products that give immediate relief to itchy skin include Sarna, Aveeno, Eucerin and Aquanil.

"A trick to increase the soothing feeling is to store it in the fridge," says Coker, which she does with Sarna.

"But maintenance with greasy emollients is still the key." ■