Q&A

How to keep your hands clean - and moisturized

By Carrie Kovarik
FOR THE INQUIRER

Q. How do I keep my hands from drying out this winter with all the washing and sanitizing we’re doing?

A. This can be a tough time of year on our skin because the winter months tend to be drier, and this year, especially, we’re encouraging everyone to be vigilant about hand-washing, or using sanitizer when washing isn’t an option. To keep your hands from drying out, there are a few simple things you can do to make sure your skin maintains its healthy, protective barrier.

First, keep washing your hands! Just because your skin is dry doesn’t mean you should forgo washing. Hand-washing is an important step to stop the spread of COVID-19, the flu, and the common cold. When washing your hands, I recommend washing in lukewarm water for at least 20 seconds, leaving your hands slightly damp when drying, then applying a moisturizing hand cream or ointment to trap some of the moisture into your skin. Don’t forget to work some of the moisturizer into your fingertips and nails because your nails can dry out, too.

If you’re using hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol to kill germs, as recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), it can be especially drying on your skin. I encourage patients to apply moisturizing hand cream or ointment immediately after the sanitizer dries; carrying a small tube of lotion can help when you’re not at home. By adding this moisturizing step, you can help replace skin lipids (oils) that have been depleted to improve the skin barrier and help prevent infections.

With a wide variety of moisturizers on the market, I’m often asked which moisturizer is best. I suggest looking for hand cream or ointment that:

► Contains mineral oil or petrolatum.

► Comes in a tube, which tends to be a cream or ointment that will be thicker and more moisturizing, rather than a pump-bottle that will be thinner and more of a lotion consistency.

► Is “fragrance-free” and “dye-free.”

These types of moisturizers tend to feel less irritating to dry, chapped skin.

Remember that our skin provides an important protective barrier. When it’s dry, it’s more prone to flaking or cracking, which can cause openings in your skin that allow bacteria and other germs to enter and increase your risk for infection. And when your skin is healthy, you are more likely to continue a healthy hand hygiene routine.

As we head into these colder, drier months, it’s important to keep washing your hands to fend off COVID-19, the flu, and the common cold and add moisturizer after washing or sanitizing. Find more tips on how to heal dry skin from the American Academy of Dermatology at www.aad.org/public.

Carrie Kovarik is a board-certified dermatologist and professor in the department of dermatology at the University of Pennsylvania.