

A fluid situation

Dehydration isn't just a midsummer risk but a potentially fatal condition to which the medicated, active and ill are vulnerable all year round. Mouth, eyes and skin are the first to suffer and the *Heartwise* editorial panel's new GP **Dr Cris Beer** explains how to keep your membranes moist.



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Even if your part of the world wasn't left parched at the end of summer you might very well be without quite realising, as individuals' body surfaces naturally and efficiently lose moisture when exposed to dry air.

This is more noticeable in less humid locales and in people taking certain medications that also cause dehydration, including for blood pressure (hypertension; see page 48), bladder and prostate conditions, hay fever and other allergies, and some antidepressants.

The areas of the body that suffer particularly with dryness include skin surfaces and the mucous membranes, namely the eyes, mouth and nose. Drying out of these areas not only feels uncomfortable but can cause a flare-up of long-term skin conditions such as itching (pruritus) and eczema; difficulty swallowing food (dysphagia) and bad breath in the case of dry mouth; and eye surface abrasions interfering with vision and leaving your eyes feeling itchy, inflamed or gritty.

Rehydrate and re-irrigate

The following strategies reflect general approaches to providing relief from dryness.

SKIN moisturise regularly with fragrance-free creams or emollients. Avoid hot showers that further dry the skin and pat rather than rub yourself dry, if at all – applying moisturiser to wet skin tends to 'seal' in more water and a tip for eczema sufferers is to moisturise within three minutes after showering. Wear gloves when

washing dishes and clean hands with gentler soaps made for dry/sensitive skin, or soap/alcohol-free cleansers. Of all the supplements, only fish oil has shown some benefit for eczema.

MOUTH drink water regularly throughout the day and avoid excessive amounts of alcohol. Tea and coffee were once thought diuretic but once you have developed caffeine tolerance they cause minimal issues with dehydration. If mouth dryness is particularly severe because you don't produce enough saliva to chew your food well, an alcohol-free, enzyme-based mouthwash from your pharmacy can help. Waking up with a dry mouth can be due to dehydration or medication but also mouth breathing while sleeping – itself a possible sign of allergies or sleep apnoea [see *HHW55*, page 71], both of which can be managed.

EYES Paradoxically, the most common sign of dry eyes is profuse watering and tears in an attempt to lubricate the eye surface. Many people will believe their problem is too much eye lubrication and not realise that it can be treated by further lubricating the eyes with artificial tears from a pharmacy. You need to use this regularly for best effects. A trial recently found fish-oil supplements to improve dry eyes but you need to take around 1000 mg/1 g a day.

KEEP IN MIND that certain medical conditions, some of which can be quite serious, can cause dryness. Speak with your GP if you suffer from dryness of your skin or mucous membranes. ♥

