







# Hung out to dry

HOW TO COPE WITH OUR CITY'S MOISTURE-SUCKING WEATHER

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**MAYBE IT'S SOMETHING** in the water — an extra chemical bonded to the fluoride —that prompts our automatic response to comments about Edmonton's frigid winter temperatures.

"Yes, it's cold," we'll politely agree, "but it's a dry cold."

The word "but" seems to imply our dehydrated deep-freeze is somehow a good thing. Yet what exactly are the benefits of months-long road ruts and desiccated boulevard trees? The crunch we hear as we dash along an Edmonton sidewalk isn't from the snow; it's the sound of the last hint of moisture being scraped off our skin. That creaking noise as we're lying in bed? Hardwood floors gasping for humidity. We

could probably sand them down with the soles of our callused, cracked feet.

James Ball moved here in December 2006 as a creative writer for Newcap Radio Alberta. "I knew I was in a different kind of winter when I got an electric shock ... off an onion," says the man who last spring won The Comic Strip's award for Funniest Person with a Day Job.

Local musicians like Susan Ekholm tell horror stories about instruments that come apart at the seams due to our famed dryness. "In the case of my other viola, it was just a disaster. It was made in England and when it got to Alberta it opened up and shrank," says Ekholm, who plays with the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra. She now keeps her best viola at the climate-controlled Winspear Centre so it never encounters winter. >>



And Cliff Higuchi still winces as he recalls some gorgeous, high-end furniture brought to the Shaw Conference Centre from China in the 1980s. Higuchi, now the centre's assistant general manager, was working for a display company that dismantled the exhibit one chilly December.

"People would pick up these exquisite dining room tables and the legs would just fall out. Or they would pick up the table and you'd hear this ZAP, and a beautiful, glossy smooth finish would crack, and not just a hairline crack in the finish; these would be absolute gaps where the wood would actually split and then warp." No one had factored in the extreme humidity change.

Our moisture-sucking climate invades every pore of our lives like a huge, indiscriminate vampire — but we boast about it? We're just raisins with attitude. We suffer itchy eyes and arena-nose — nostrils that stick together or, even worse, bleed when we step out into a frosty eve from parched indoor air. We endure chapped lips, flyaway hair and enough electrostatic shock to fuel a fleet of hybrid cars. Step out of your car: ZAP. Slip off your coat: ZAP. Slide over your exercise ball: ZAP. How is all this an advantage?

And let's not get started on the agony of static cling. Given that many of us put on a few insulating pounds in winter, do we really need to have our bodies accentuated quite so dramatically with shirts and skirts that don't know how to let go? Or worse, do we want the embrace of that random sock or thong, clinging surreptitiously to our outfits as we leave for work?

The fact is, when we insinuate that dry is good, we engage in mythmaking of the highest order. Not to throw a wet blanket




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## ACTUALLY, THE DRY-COLD LINE IS AN OLD WIVES' TALE

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(apparently impossible in this climate) on our enthusiasm, but that dry-cold line is an old wives' tale, says Dean Turgeon, president of the northern Alberta chapter of the American Society of Heating, Refrigerating and Air-Conditioning Engineers. "Very few people understand that dry air feels cold to the skin," adds Turgeon, who also owns Vital Engineering Corporation. "We're big water bags; that's all we are. We've got moisture on our skin, our breath, everywhere." If you walk into two rooms of the same temperature, but one has more moisture in it, "the one with the higher rate of humidity would feel warmer because the rate of evaporation or moisture absorption is lower," he says.

Compare one of our balmy 25C days to a 25C day in Toronto, which hugs Lake Ontario's shoreline. We breeze through it, while they're crank up the AC because they feel too hot. When the temperature drops by 50 degrees, guess what? Toronto's humidity still makes it feel warmer, despite what we say through our chattering teeth. It's time to wake up and smell the shriveled roses.

What we need is a plan, a survivor's guide to our cruelly dry winters that goes beyond stuffing briefcases and glove compartments with moisturizers (which brings new meaning to the term ice cream). First stop: Garneau Hall, a Whyte Avenue seniors' residence, for some sage advice from long-time survivors.

"Goose grease. I remember my mother had a jar of goose grease in the kitchen if her hands were dry," recalls a resident with lovely skin. Yeah, but ... the thought of smearing on a fowl's fatty bits leaves one to shudder with more than just cold.

A soothing soak in a hot tub? Think again. Hot water actually strips away the protective oils on your skin, says Dr. Mariusz Sapizasko, medical director of Edmonton's Western Canada Dermatology Institute. Our skin >>

wouldn't be in such a Sahara-esque mess if we weren't so obsessive about personal cleanliness and daily bathing, he adds. "We use too much shampoo, too much soap and too many body cleansers. Yes, you need to clean the critical areas: the underarms, the groin and the feet, but I doubt the knees and elbows got any critical action overnight."

All right, then. Less contact with water on the outside of our bodies. But what about moisturizing the inside, by drinking more liquids? Another myth, says Sapijaszko. "Skin moisture is really oils. Drinking an appropriate amount of water during the day makes the whole body function properly, including the skin, but it doesn't make our skin moist. What contributes to moisture of the skin is the oils." In other words, it's the crude, dude.

You actually *do* need crude for damaged skin, says cosmetic physician Ashwani Singh, who advises using a moisturizer with a petroleum or Glaxal base; for regular dehydration anything that creates a barrier is good. But don't go thinking you can just slap it on and be done. Winter grooming means debriding, says Singh, which has nothing to do with virginal visions in white, and more with scrubbing off the season's dead skin so moisturizers can penetrate. Meet micro-dermabrasion, chemical peels, facials or, at the very least, those nasty exfoliating gloves. Around here, it seems nothing spells TLC like a steel-wool body scrub.

Though it's more fun in theory, bringing chapped lips to a make-out session is not a smart exfoliation method. To avoid sandpaper puckers, use non-medicated balms that don't irritate the lips, advises Singh. And ease up on the toothpaste, Sapijaszko adds. "It's designed for the mouth and it's harsh." If you're literally foaming at the mouth, those whiteners and other chemicals are attacking your delicate lip skin.

The sorry evidence of this freeze-dried

climate is right at our fingertips. Nails crack and crumble to nothing because cuticle beds aren't properly moisturized, says Singh. Warns Sapijaszko: only trim away cuticles that are peeling or fraying. Pushing them back can break the seal that stops nasty things from entering the nail bed — it's enough to start biting one's nails.

## EASE UP ON TOOTHPASTE AND MEDICATED LIP BALMS TO SOOTHE LIPS

Edmontonians with contact lenses or sensitive eyes are also left high and dry. The eye, explains local ophthalmologist Dr. Royce Johnson, "is just a mucous membrane that has to be constantly wet for comfort and our environment is terrible in the winter time." His advice? "Move to Vancouver — I'm serious, we've advised patients to move there — or Hawaii." OK. While we're at it, let's pretend the Oilers are still a dynasty.

A humidifier is a more realistic fix. Keep the levels between 30 and 50 per cent, says Turgeon, the registered engineering technologist. Indulge your inner geek by buying a hygrometer, which measures these levels, for \$10 to \$20 at hardware stores. Anything higher than 55 per cent and you're liable to do grow-op-type damage; mould will ruin the drywall and create health hazards. Note to self: if water condenses on windows, it's time to dial it down.

You can't just plug in your humidifier and

get smug, either. A common type attaches to a furnace and has a pad or sponge that absorbs water, sending out humidity along with the hot air. Newsflash: that pad needs to be replaced once a year. All the calcium and other minerals that stayed behind when the water was swept into the heating system had all summer to turn that pad into a rock. And remember, you can't squeeze water from a stone. New pads set you back about six bucks — cheaper and easier than scrubbing calcified minerals off the old one, as your already flaking skin dissolves completely from the caustic chemicals you need to use.

Portable humidifiers are a different story. Of the three types, it's the cool-mist humidifiers that Health Canada stresses need careful maintenance. Empty out leftover water after each use, and regularly disinfect the reservoir. Otherwise, bacteria can collect and breed and spread into the air, creating the perfect conditions for Legionnaires' disease. Did anyone promise this would be easy?

There are other ways to humidify, though. Bowls of water by a heat register, water walls or fountains, and a passion for steamed vegetables.

So why do we brag about our winters? Well, with no humidity, there are no clouds, just gorgeous big skies of fabulous, crystal-clear sunshine. On a cold day, all that sunshine can make us feel seven to nine degrees warmer, adds David Phillips, senior climatologist with Environment Canada. But slather on the sunscreen, warns Singh. Sunshine, not dryness, gets the blame for etching wrinkles into our skin.

Comedian Ball adds the final positive spin: our lack of humidity also shapes our character and gives Edmontonians a suitably dry sense of humour. "If you're freezing all the time, you have to conserve energy. Understatement will come easily. You'll *SEEM* cool, but you're really hypothermic." ■