



Daily Care Information

The Importance Of Emollients And Steroids In The Treatment Of Eczema

Dry skin is one of the main symptoms of eczema. Changes in skin moisture levels cause a reduction in the barrier function which in turn increases water loss, thus allowing the penetration of irritants and allergens which trigger eczema. Itching is another major and most distressing symptom of eczema and produces an itch-scratch-itch cycle. Scratching leads to the release of histamine, a chemical in the body which makes the itching worse and leads to skin damage. This allows entry for irritants, allergens and bacteria which trigger eczema.

Emollients

Emollients soothe and relieve the itch, producing an oily layer over the skin surface which traps water beneath it. The resulting restoration of the skin's barrier function by emollients prevents penetration of irritants, allergens and bacteria thereby reducing or preventing the development of eczema. A good skin care routine using emollients can soothe, moisturise and protect the skin, thus helping reduce the need for steroid preparations. In mild to moderate eczema, topical steroids and topical antibiotics should only be necessary for flare-ups of eczema.



What Are Emollients?

Emollient is the medical word for moisturiser. However, they are different from cosmetic moisturisers in that they tend to be unperfumed and do not have anti-aging ingredients. Applying emollients can be time consuming and tedious but it helps to know what they do for your skin. Emollients help skin to feel more comfortable and less itchy. They keep the skin moist and flexible, helping to prevent cracks. There are many types of emollients and they can be classified according to how they are applied.

- Lotions, creams and ointments: applied directly to the skin
- Bath oils: added to the bath water or directly to the skin in the shower
- Soap substitutes: used instead of soap to cleanse the skin

When And How To Apply Emollients:

When the skin is very dry, using a combination of the three types of emollients helps give the best hydration and restore the skin's barrier function to normal. Emollients can be used in combination with other treatments which your doctor may prescribe such as topical steroids.

Emollient cream or ointment:

- 1 Use liberally and frequently – every hour if the skin is very dry, but at least 3 times a day.
- 2 Apply gently in the direction of the hair growth. Never rub up and down as this could trigger itching, block hair follicles or create more heat in the skin.
- 3 Apply emollients after bathing while water is still trapped in the skin, for extra hydration.
- 4 Avoid putting hands into large tubs of emollient creams/ointments. Use a spatula to take out the correct amount each time and replace lid.
- 5 Continue to use the emollient, even when the eczema has improved. This will help prevent flare-ups.

Daily Care Routine (the importance of emollients and steroids in the treatment of eczema)

Lotions: Lotions contain more water and less fat than creams. They spread easily and are cooling but not very effective at moisturising very dry skin. They are useful for hairy areas or for quick absorption if time is short.

Bath Oil: Adding to warm, not hot bath water cleans and hydrates the skin. Soak for 6-10 minutes, pat (do not rub) the skin dry. Apply emollient. Young infants may require 2 baths daily.

Emollient Soap Substitutes: Use whenever you would soap but particularly on the hands and while bathing or showering.

Choosing the right emollient: The best emollient is the one which the patient prefers because then you or your child will use it more frequently. Always try new emollients on a small area of unaffected skin first to test for a reaction. Once you have chosen your emollients they will have to be used frequently to have the maximum benefit, this should be ideally every few hours but at least 3 – 4 times a day.

What are Topical Steroids?

Steroids are a group of natural hormones produced in the body by a variety of different glands. Topical steroids used in the treatment of eczema are mainly synthetic. Like emollients, topical steroid preparations are available as creams, ointments, lotions and sometimes gels. The one prescribed will depend upon the severity of your eczema. When the eczema is dry, it is likely that your doctor will prescribe an ointment-based preparation, whereas creams, which are light and cooling, may be used to treat moist, weepy or wet eczema. Lotions and gels are easiest to apply on the hairy areas of the body.

The main value of topical steroids is that they reduce inflammation and speed up the healing of the skin. They also help to make the skin less red, hot, itchy and sore. The steroids used in eczema are usually described as topical, meaning that they are applied directly to the skin.

Application

Steroid preparations should not be used to prevent eczema occurring, only to treat the symptoms. You will be instructed to apply a steroid twice a day, although in some cases a doctor may recommend three times. Any further use of the steroid will not be of benefit in controlling the eczema and could be harmful to the skin on a long term basis. Some steroid preparations have now been developed that only need to be applied once a day to control eczema. This means that the amount of steroid used is reduced.

There are no standard rules regarding whether to apply a steroid preparation after or before using an emollient. Some people are happiest using an emollient first to prepare the skin, followed by the steroid. However, whichever order of care you choose, it is important that you leave as long a period as practical, at least 20 minutes between the two treatments.

Daily Care Routine (the importance of emollients and steroids in the treatment of eczema)

Topical steroids should be applied sparingly as a thin smear. It can sometimes be difficult to judge how much steroid to use and there are now guides on the amount of treatment required to cover body areas that are affected by eczema. These have been based on the finger tip unit (FTU) which relates to the amount of cream or ointment that just covers the end of an adult finger tip to the crease of the first joint when it comes out of an ordinary tube nozzle. Different parts of the body require different numbers of finger-tip units. Further information of this kind is often provided in the leaflet supplied with your medication.

All steroids will be marked with a use-by-date and should not be used after the time stated. Repeated prescriptions are not generally advised in cases of eczema since the condition can alter and it is important that the doctor sees the skin to reassess the suitability of the treatment.

Are topical steroids safe?

Fear of side effects can make people under-treat their eczema by stopping a treatment too soon or not using the steroid they have been given. This can be detrimental to the overall management of the condition and may mean that a stronger preparation has to be used to bring the eczema under control again.

If used over long periods of time, topical steroids can thin the skin making it appear transparent, fragile and over-susceptible to bruising. Topical steroids used appropriately and under supervision are a safe and effective treatment for eczema. The likelihood of side effects occurring is directly related to the potency of the preparation, where it is being used, the condition of the skin and that age of the person concerned. All these factors should be taken into consideration when a prescription is given to treat eczema. As with all medication, pregnant women should consult their doctor regarding continued use of their usual topical steroid preparation.

Hydrocortisone 1%, 0.5%, 0.1% or 0.05% is extremely unlikely to cause effects of this kind and can be used on the face and in treating eczema in young children. Warning: be careful not to confuse with hydrocortisone butyrate which is a potent topical steroid.

Potencies:

Topical steroid preparations are divided up into four categories according to how strong or potent they are. The terms used are: mild, moderately potent, potent and very potent. It can be difficult to work out the potency of a product since a low percentage of steroid does not necessarily imply a less potent product. The potency of the steroid you are given will be based on several factors:

- 1 Age: children are usually prescribed mild steroids although occasionally a stronger preparation may be required depending on the severity of the eczema.
- 2 Severity of the eczema: A mild or moderately potent steroid may be replaced by a stronger potency if the eczema flares up.
- 3 Body site: Thick areas such as the feet and hands can be treated with potent preparations. For the face and genital area, mild and moderately potent preparations are commonly prescribed. If the steroid is applied to the body folds or in areas covered by tight clothing this increases potency so a milder preparation should be used.
- 4 Size of the affected area: A weaker strength may be prescribed when a large area of skin requires treatment.
- 5 Other treatments: If bandaging forms part of the treatment a weaker steroid may be chosen because bandaging increases the potency of the steroid.

NB: You may be given more than one topical steroid to treat your eczema. Make sure that you are clear which preparation to use on which part of the body. If in doubt talk to your pharmacist or contact your doctor.

In Summary

Under the supervision of a doctor and used properly and sensibly in combination with good skincare, as part of an overall management routine, topical steroids are a valuable treatment for eczema. Most packs of ointments and creams contain instructions on how to use the treatment properly. But if you are ever in doubt about how to use your treatment do not hesitate to ask your doctor or the pharmacist who supplied the treatment.

It is important to bear in mind that emollients, meanwhile, need to become an accepted part of the daily skincare routine. They soothe, moisturize and protect the skin, thus providing the basis for everyday management of eczema and help reduce the need for topical steroid preparations.

These details are only a general guide. Individual circumstances differ and the Irish Skin Foundation does not prescribe, offer individual medical advice or endorse products or treatments.

For further information on Eczema contact the Irish Skin Foundation on 01 716 6299 or email info@irishskinfoundation.ie

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