



WHAT ARE THE AIMS OF THIS LEAFLET?

This leaflet has been written to help children and young people understand more about emollients used for skin conditions. This information will also be helpful to parents.

WHAT ARE EMOLLIENTS AND HOW DO THEY WORK?

The word 'emollient' comes from a Latin word with the same spelling, which means "to make soft". Emollient is a substance that helps soothe, soften and increase moisture levels in the skin. Emollients include ointments, gels, creams, sprays and lotions, which are put on the skin to help stop dryness and to keep the skin moist. Ointments are greasy as they are made from oils. Creams are less greasy as they are a mixture of oil and water. Gels often have added moisturising ingredients and rub in easily. Sprays are good for hard-to-reach areas and sore or infected skin that should not be touched. Lotions have the highest water content which makes them easier to apply. Lotions are good to use on the scalp because ointments will make the hair greasy.

Emollients help protect and moisturise the outer layer of the skin. They keep water in the skin to help prevent dryness and help to protect your skin from things which can irritate the skin and cause your skin condition to flare up.

Which emollient you use depends on what suits you and the specific needs of your skin. It can be helpful to have a lighter product for daytime use and an ointment for night-time use. You may also find that you like a different emollient for the hotter

summer months compared to the winter months.

Soap products dry the skin. Emollients can be used instead of soap to wash and cleanse your skin. Although they do not form bubbles, they are still good at cleaning dirt off without making your skin dry.

WHAT SKIN CONDITIONS ARE TREATED WITH EMOLLIENTS?

Emollients are used for many skin conditions, especially those which cause dry and itchy skin such as [atopic eczema](#), [psoriasis](#) and [ichthyosis](#).

WILL EMOLLIENTS CURE MY SKIN CONDITION?

Emollients will not cure your skin condition but will help make you feel more comfortable. They are an essential part of a treatment plan for any skin condition which causes dryness and inflammation. Emollients have been shown to reduce flare ups and reduce the need for steroid creams and ointments for people affected by eczema and may even make other treatments (steroid creams and ointments) more effective. Therefore, people affected by dry skin conditions need regular emollient treatment as a first line of treatment as well as long-term maintenance treatment.

If the skin is inflamed (itchy, sore and redder than your normal skin) you are likely to need an anti-inflammatory such as a steroid cream or ointment (see information on [topical corticosteroids](#)) as well as using emollients regularly. It is important to use emollients all over the body, not just where the skin is dry or inflamed.

HOW OFTEN / WHEN SHOULD I USE EMOLLIENTS?

Emollients should be used every day, even when the skin condition is not causing problems. The number of times per day will vary depending on how dry the skin is. For example, this can vary from just using an emollient wash cream instead of soap, once or twice a day, to emollients several times a day if the skin condition is more severe.

It is helpful to put on extra emollient (or a greasier type of emollient) when you know you will come into contact with something which can make your skin condition worse. These may be things such as cold weather, water, swimming, pollens and some foods (for example, citrus foods and tomatoes).

HOW MUCH EMOLLIENT SHOULD I USE?

The doctor or healthcare professional looking after your skin condition will recommend how much to apply and how long a tub of emollient should last. Children and young people affected by dry skin conditions are entitled to emollients on prescription. It is important to let your doctor know if you are running out of emollients so you can be given a repeat prescription.

Some products come in pump dispensers or tubes, whereas others come in tubs. If you have a tub of emollient, it is important not to put your hands in it to prevent germs getting into the tub. Always use a clean spoon to take out what you need from the tub and use a second spoon if you did not take enough. The spoons can be washed in warm soapy water and then used the next time you apply emollient.

There are a few emollients which come as a spray, but these are not always available on prescription.

HOW LONG WILL I NEED TO USE EMOLLIENTS BEFORE I SEE AN EFFECT?

Your skin will feel softer and less rough as soon as you start emollient treatment, providing you apply enough and as often your doctor or healthcare professional recommends.

CAN I APPLY OTHER SKIN TREATMENTS AT THE SAME TIME AS EMOLLIENTS?

If your skin is inflamed, it is likely you will be prescribed treatments to reduce the itching and redness (for example, a [steroid cream or ointment](#)). It is recommended to have a gap of 20 to 30 minutes between applying emollients and other creams/ointments which your doctor or healthcare professional has prescribed for your skin condition. They will discuss with you the order in which your treatments should be used.

WHAT ARE THE COMMON SIDE EFFECTS OF EMOLLIENTS?

- Emollients contain preservatives and these can sometimes sting (especially if the skin is sore and itchy) and sometimes can cause a rash. If this seems to be an ongoing problem, then you should ask your doctor or healthcare professional to recommend a different emollient. There are many emollient products available, and it can take time to find the best one for your skin.
- Always apply emollients in the direction of hair growth to prevent clogging and irritation of the hair follicles which can lead to inflammation (red, darker skin and soreness) and infection (folliculitis). For example, this means rubbing from your knee down to your ankle, rather than in the other direction.
- Emollients can cause a fire if in contact with a naked flame, such as a candle, cigarette or an open fire. This is particularly a problem if the



emollient has soaked into bandaging or clothing. Clothing and bed linen should be washed regularly. Avoid getting emollient on fabric covered furniture such as sofas.

- Emollients make the bath or shower very slippery. It is advisable to use a non-slip mat. When you have applied emollients always wash your hands before picking anything up as your hands will be slippery.
- Emollients containing sodium lauryl sulphate (SLS), such as aqueous cream are not recommended as these can irritate and inflame the skin.

CAN I HAVE IMMUNISATIONS (VACCINATIONS) WHILST ON EMOLLIENTS?

Yes, you can have all vaccinations whilst on emollients.

WHERE CAN I GET MORE INFORMATION ABOUT EMOLLIENTS?

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/emollients>

<https://eczema.org/wp-content/uploads/Emollients-Oct-18-1.pdf>

For details of source materials used please contact the Clinical Standards Unit (clinicalstandards@bad.org.uk).

This leaflet aims to provide accurate information about the subject and is a consensus of the views held by representatives of the British Association of Dermatologists: individual patient circumstances may differ, which might alter both the advice and course of therapy given to you by your doctor.

This leaflet has been assessed for readability by the British Association of Dermatologists' Patient Information Lay Review Panel

BRITISH ASSOCIATION OF DERMATOLOGISTS

PATIENT INFORMATION LEAFLET

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