



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?

Emollients are moisturising treatments that help soothe and soften dry skin. They also help the skin hold to moisture. Emollients come as ointments, gels, creams, sprays and lotions. Ointments are greasy as they contain oils.

- Creams are less greasy as contain a mixture of oil and water.
- Gels rub into the skin easily and may contain other moisturising ingredients.
- Sprays can be good for areas that are difficult to reach. They can also be useful when the skin is sore or infected or should not be touched.
- Lotions contain more water than other types of emollient which makes them easier to apply. Lotions are good to use on the scalp as they are less likely to make the hair greasy.

Emollients moisturise and protect the outer layer of the skin. They help keep moisture in the skin, which stops it from becoming dry. They can also help protect your skin from things that may irritate it or worsen your skin condition.

You may need to try different emollients to find one which suits your skin. You might prefer a lighter emollient during the day and a greasier ointment at night. You may also prefer different emollients for

different times of the year, depending on the weather.

Soap can dry the skin. Most emollients can be used instead of soap to wash and cleanse your skin. They do not form bubbles but can still clean your skin without drying it out.

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 they can help your skin feel more comfortable. They are an important part of treating skin condition that cause dry and inflamed skin.

For people with [eczema](#), using emollients can reduce flare ups and reduce the need for steroid creams and ointments. Emollients may also make other treatments ([steroid creams and ointments](#)) more effective.

If you have a dry skin condition, it is important to use your emollient regularly even when your skin improves.

If the skin is inflamed (itchy, sore and redder than your normal skin), emollients may not be enough. You may also need treatment to reduce the inflammation, such as a steroid cream or ointment .

There are some people who recommend 'no moisture treatments' as a possible way to manage dry skin conditions such as [eczema](#). However, there is very limited

evidence to support this, and it can be a cause of severe health issues.

It is important to use emollients regularly on all areas of skin, not just areas that are 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 would be unusual to have to use more than 3 times a day as long as other treatments are being used to target inflammation in the skin.

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?

Your healthcare professional will recommend how much to apply and how long your emollient should last. Children and young people affected by dry skin conditions are entitled to emollients on prescription. It is important to let your healthcare professional 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?

How long it takes for your skin to improve will vary. It depends on your skin condition, how severe it is, and the type of emollient you use. Using your emollient regularly, as advised by your healthcare professional, will help you get the most benefit from it.

Emollients start to moisturise the skin when you apply them. Your skin will soon feel softer and less.

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

If your skin is inflamed, you may already 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 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. People will find different emollients more suitable and this may be of particular consideration in those who have heightened sensitivities to textures (including those with sensory difficulties). There are many emollient products available, and it can take time to find the best one for your skin.



Emollients containing sodium lauryl sulphate (SLS) are not recommended as these can irritate and inflame the skin. Please speak with your healthcare professional and double-check the ingredient list before applying.

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 have not been shown to prevent eczema in babies and in these large studies there was an increased risk of skin infection and possibly developing allergies. This research is helping to develop new guidance for management of eczema and weaning to help manage eczema and prevent food allergies. However, emollients are an important part of management of people of all ages who have eczema.

CAUTION:

Emollients, creams, lotions and ointments contain oils. When emollient products get in contact with dressings, clothing, bed linen or hair, there is a danger that they could catch fire more easily. There is still a risk if the emollient products have dried. People using skincare or haircare products should be very careful near naked flames or lit cigarettes. Wash clothing daily and bedlinen frequently, if they are in contact with emollients. This may not remove the risk completely, even at high temperatures. Caution is still needed. More information may be obtained at: www.gov.uk/guidance/safe-use-of-emollient-skin-creams-to-treat-dry-skin-conditions

www.nfcc.org.uk/our-services/campaigns/know-the-fire-risk/

Emollients make the bath or shower very slippery. It is advisable to take extra care and use a non-slip mat. When you have applied emollients always wash your hands before picking anything up as your hands will be slippery.

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?

Eczema UK:

<https://www.eczema.org.uk/support/emollients>

NHS:

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

Jargon Buster:

<https://www.skinhealthinfo.org.uk/support-resources/jargon-buster/>

Please note that the British Association of Dermatologists (BAD) provides web links to additional resources to help people access a range of information about their treatment or skin condition. The views expressed in these external resources may not be shared by the BAD or its members. The BAD has no control of and does not endorse the content of external links.



This leaflet aims to provide accurate information about the subject and is a consensus of the views held by representatives of the British Society for Paediatric and Adolescent Dermatology and 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

PRODUCED | JANUARY 2023

UPDATED | JANUARY 2025

