

# Emollients and how to use them

This leaflet aims to answer your questions about emollient treatment and provide you with a step-by-step guide on how to apply your emollient. If you have any further questions or concerns, please speak to a doctor or nurse caring for you.

## What are emollients?

Emollient is simply the medical word for a moisturiser. Emollients help soothe the skin and provide relief from itching and dryness. Their use can prevent conditions like eczema ‘flaring up’. There are many different types of emollients, and they can be classified according to how they are used and how greasy they are.

Emollient type according to use	Description
Soap substitutes	Soap is very drying for the skin and should be avoided in people with dry skin conditions. Any emollient (except white soft paraffin alone) can be used with water to cleanse the skin, as they do not remove the natural oils in the skin.
Leave-on emollients	These emollients are applied directly onto the skin and left on to soak in. They are not washed off the skin (as with soap substitutes).

Emollient type according to greasiness	Description
Ointments	These are greasy in nature. They are usually made of white soft paraffin or liquid paraffin, and are ideal for very dry or thickened skin and night-time application. They do not usually contain preservatives (ingredients that help to protect the product from bacteria/germs and increase its shelf-life) and are therefore less likely to cause skin reactions.
Creams	These contain a mixture of oil and water and are less greasy, and therefore easier to spread on the skin than ointments. They must be used frequently and applied liberally to prevent the skin from drying out. Creams usually come in a container with a pump dispenser and are good for day-time application.
Lotions	These contain the least oil and most water so are the least effective in moisturising the skin. They normally contain preservatives so may cause skin irritation. Lotions are useful for hairy areas such as scalps and areas of weepy skin.

## How do emollients work?

Emollients trap moisture in the skin and form a protective oily layer on the outer skin surface which helps skin repair and improves skin hydration. You may wish to use different types of emollients at different times of the day, on different areas of the body or when severity of your condition varies. For example, use a cream in the morning if dressing to go to work or school and an ointment in the evening when wearing pyjamas.

Most emollients (except white soft paraffin alone) can be used as a soap substitute as well.

## Which emollient is best?

There is no ‘best emollient’. The type (or types) to use depends on the dryness of the skin, the area of skin involved, and what is comfortable and acceptable to you.




More than one emollient may be required for use at different times of the day or for when the skin condition is more active.

## How much leave-on emollient should I apply?

The quantity of leave-on emollient required will vary depending on the size of the person, the extent and severity of the skin condition, and whether the emollient is also being used as a soap substitute.

As a general guide, if you needed to treat the whole body, the recommended quantities used are 600 g per week for an adult and 250-500 g per week for a child.

## How should I apply my emollient treatment?

<p><b>Step 1</b></p> <p>Wash your hands to remove invisible bacteria.</p>	
<p><b>Step 2</b></p> <p>Do not put fingers into tubs to scoop out the ointment as you may introduce bacteria into the ointment. To reduce the risk of infection, transfer some emollient onto a clean plate using a clean desert spoon.</p> <p>If you have a cream in a tub with a pump top, you can pump directly onto your hand.</p>	
<p><b>Step 3</b></p> <p>Emollients should be applied to the skin in a downward direction of hair growth and left in a thin layer to soak in – this may take 10 minutes. Please do not rub emollients in.</p>	

## How often should I apply my emollient treatment?

- Apply emollients whenever the skin feels dry and as often as you need. This may be two to four times a day or more.
- Apply emollients immediately after washing or bathing when skin has been dabbed dry.
- Emollients can and should be applied at other times during the day, for example in extreme weather to provide a barrier from the cold.
- You should continue to use emollients after your skin condition has cleared if the clinical condition justifies continued use. Your doctor or nurse will be able to advise you.

## How and when should I use my topical steroid (if this has been prescribed)?

- Intensive use of emollients can reduce the need for topical corticosteroids. The quantity and frequency of applying emollients should be far greater than that of topical steroids.
- If a topical steroid is required, emollients should be applied at least 30 minutes before or after the steroid.

## What precautions should I take with emollients?

- There is a risk of severe and fatal burns with all emollients. This applies to all emollients, whether they contain paraffin or not. The MHRA has produced resources to promote awareness of the risk and to support safe use - [MHRA alert burns](#) . There is also a useful poster here: [Emollients poster burns](#).
  - Do not to smoke or go near naked flames or potential causes of ignition, such as cigarettes.
  - Clothing or fabric such as bedding or bandages that have been in contact with an emollient or emollient-treated skin can rapidly ignite. Change patient clothing and bedding regularly, preferably daily, because emollients soak into fabric and can become a fire hazard
  - Be aware that washing clothing or fabric at a high temperature may reduce emollient build-up but not totally remove it.
  - See: [Safe use of emollient skin creams to treat dry skin conditions](#) for information <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/safe-use-of-emollient-skin-creams-to-treat-dry-skin-conditions>

- Ointments and creams used in the bath and shower can make the surface slippery so take extra care.
- If you find an emollient is making your skin sore and/or very itchy, you may be allergic to one of the ingredients and you should discuss this with your doctor or nurse.
- If you are having ultraviolet light treatment or radiotherapy, ask for specific guidance on emollient use as instructions may differ slightly.
- Epimax ointment and Epimax paraffin-free ointment can harm the eyes and should not be used on the face. Wash your hands and avoid touching your eyes after using these products. [MHRA alert Epimax](#)

DOs	DON'Ts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Apply emollients as regularly and as frequently as you can</li> <li>• Carry emollients with you when on the go</li> <li>• Keep fingernails short and smooth</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rub into the skin</li> <li>• Put fingers in tubs</li> <li>• Smoke or be near fire or flames after applying emollients</li> </ul>

### Bath emollients

A tablespoon of any ointment (except 50:50) can be dissolved in some hot water and added to the bath water. Any cream emollient can be used as a soap substitute. Take care though, as the bath will be slippery.

### Useful sources of information

**National Eczema Society** - [w: www.eczema.org](http://www.eczema.org)

**British Association of Dermatologists (BAD)** - [w: www.bad.org.uk](http://www.bad.org.uk)

**NHS Choices (Emollients)** - [w: www.nhs.uk/conditions/emollients/Pages/Introduction.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/emollients/Pages/Introduction.aspx)

### Contact us

If you have any questions or concerns about your emollient treatment, please speak to the nurse or doctor looking after you.

### Your comments and concerns

For advice, support or to raise a concern, contact our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS). To make a complaint, contact the complaints department. [e: hweicbwe.patientfeedback@nhs.net](mailto:hweicbwe.patientfeedback@nhs.net)

### NHS 111

Offers medical help and advice from fully trained advisers supported by experienced nurses and paramedics. Available over the phone 24 hours a day. [t: 111](tel:111)

### NHS Choices

Provides online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you make choices about your health. [w: www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)

### Information reproduced with kind permission from Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust

Version	V1.0
Previous Versions	This patient information leaflet has been through the harmonisation process and has been adopted from the following previously approved version: Emollients and how to use them was also approved by WE MOPB in August 2018
Developed by	HWE ICB Pharmacy and Medicines Optimisation Team,
Date ratified	November 2024
Review date	This document is based upon the evidence available at the time of publication. The document will be reviewed upon request in light of new evidence becoming available.