

## EMOLLIENTS

### **What are emollients?**

Emollients are substances that replace the natural oils that help keep water in our skin to prevent it becoming dry, cracked, rough, scaly and itchy.

### **Why use emollients?**

Applying emollients to your skin regularly is worthwhile as it can prevent eczema and other dry skin conditions from becoming worse. Using emollients may reduce or remove the need for other treatments that may cause side effects, e.g. steroid creams.

### **Which emollient should I use?**

There is a wide range of emollients available and they all work to keep water in the skin. Emollients can be creams and ointments. You may need to try more than one emollient before you find the one that suits you best.

### **Are there any possible side-effects from emollients?**

Prescription emollients tend to be non-perfumed. However, some creams contain preservatives, fragrances and other additives. Some people become sensitised (allergic) to an ingredient. This can make the skin inflammation worse rather than better. If you suspect that you are sensitive to an emollient then see your doctor for advice and try an alternative.

**Note:** Ointments tend to cause fewer problems with skin sensitivity as, unlike creams, ointments usually do not contain preservatives.

**Warning:** Paraffin-based emollients are flammable. Keep them away from lights and flames. Dressings and clothing that have contact with a paraffin-based products are easily ignited by a naked flame.

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### **How to apply emollients**

- ✓ Wash hands and apply the emollient thinly (just so the skin glistens), gently and quickly in smooth downward strokes in the direction of hair growth.
- ✓ Apply as often as needed to keep the skin supple and moist, usually at least 3 - 4 times a day but some people may need to increase this to up to every hour if the skin is very dry.
- ✓ As a rule, ointments need to be applied less often than creams or lotions for the same effect.
- ✓ Apply emollients after washing to trap moisture in the skin.
- ✓ Avoid massaging creams or ointments in or applying too thickly as this can block hair follicles, trap heat and cause itching.
- ✓ Emollients can be applied before or after any other treatments e.g. steroid creams but it is important to leave at least 30 minutes before applying the next treatment.

**Don't stop using your emollient if your skin looks better as skin can flare up again quickly**

### **Bathing and washing**

- Avoid bubble baths and soaps as they can be irritating and dry the skin.
- Bathe regularly in tepid (lukewarm) water only. Regular bathing cleans and helps prevent infection by removing scales, crusts, dried blood and dirt.
- Use an emollient as a soap substitute (most emollients can be used in this way). Apply the emollient prior to washing and directly afterwards onto damp skin. Alternatively you could use a bath or shower emollient designed specifically for washing with, then apply your usual leave-on emollient afterwards. Some doctors prefer to recommend the first option as they think this method is better at moisturising the skin.
- When drying do not rub with a towel but pat the skin dry to avoid damage to the skin.

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- Take care when entering the bath/shower after applying emollients as they make surfaces slippery.

### **Reference**

Adapted from NHS Rotherham CCG Emollient Prescribing Guidelines October 2012, and based on information from [www.patient.co.uk](http://www.patient.co.uk) and the National Eczema Society [www.eczema.org](http://www.eczema.org)