

# FACTSHEET



Eczema affects 5 million children and adults in the UK every year.

The Society is the only organisation in the UK devoted to improving the quality of life for people with eczema and their careers.

The Society provides practical support and information on the day-to-day management and treatment of eczema including:

- Confidential telephone and e-mail Helplines
- Fact sheets and information booklets
- Members' information pack and quarterly magazine

The Society also funds vital research into the cause and treatment of eczema and campaigns to influence health services for a better understanding of eczema and its effects.

The National Eczema Society receives no Government or Health Service funding.

The Society relies entirely on donations, legacies and membership subscriptions to fund this vital work.

## Topical Steroids

Topical steroids are a valuable tool in the management of eczema but in order for them to be successful, they need to form part of a programme of measures. A good skincare routine needs to be in place, involving the use of emollients to moisturise the skin and soap substitutes to cleanse the skin. Contact with substances that may dry or irritate the skin further should be reduced as far as possible.

For some people with eczema, the regular use of emollient preparations is all that is needed to keep their condition under control. However, for many people there will be a time when a steroid preparation is required as part of their treatment.

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### 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 in creams, ointments, lotions and sometimes gels and the one you are prescribed will depend on the severity of your eczema.

When your eczema is very 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 for eczema are usually described as topical, meaning that they are applied directly to the skin.

There are two types of topical steroids that can be bought from a pharmacy without a prescription. Hydrocortisone is a mildly potent topical steroid and comes as 1%, 0.5%, 0.1% or 0.05% in the form of both creams and ointments and, more recently, clobetasone butyrate, which is a moderately potent topical steroid cream.

Pharmacists can sell these to treat mild to moderate eczema as well as allergic and irritant contact dermatitis and insect bites. However, when it is supplied in this way, .i.e. without prescription, they should NOT be used on the eyes of face, on broken or infected skin, on the anal or genital areas, in pregnancy or by someone under the age of 10 years. Usage of this kind requires the guidance of a health professional.

If the doctor feels that your eczema could be infected you may be prescribed a combination preparation that contains the ingredients aimed at fighting the infection. Preparations of this kind usually have a letter following the name of the treatment e.g. Locoid C, Betnovate N.

### 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:

- Your age. Children are usually prescribed mild topical steroids although occasionally a stronger preparation may be required, depending on the severity of the eczema;
- Severity of the eczema. A mild or moderately potent steroid may be replaced by a stronger potency if the eczema flares up;
- Body site. Thick skin areas such as the feet and the hands can be treated with potent preparations. For the face and genital areas mild and moderately potent preparations are commonly prescribed, a potent steroid will only be used for severe, unresponsive eczema in these areas, usually for a limited period. If the steroid is applied to the body folds or in areas covered by tight clothing this increases its potency so a milder preparation should be used;
- Size of the affected area. A weaker strength may be prescribed when a large area of skin requires treatment;
- 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 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/nurse.*

### Application

Steroid preparations should not be used to prevent eczema occurring, only to treat the symptoms. You will usually be instructed to apply a steroid twice a day

*(Continued on page 2)*

# FACTSHEET



(Continued from page 1)

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although in some cases a doctor may recommend three times.

Any further use of the steroid will not be of benefit in controlling 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 use 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 15 minutes, between the two treatments.

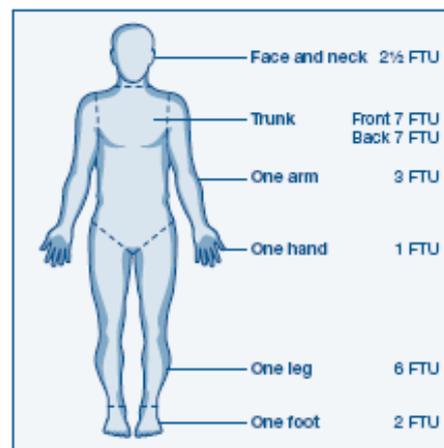
Topical steroids should be applied sparingly as a thin smear. It can sometimes be difficult to judge how much steroid to use and there are now guides on the amount of treatment required to cover body areas that are affected by eczema.

These have been based on the Finger Tip Dosing Unit (TFDU) which relates to the amount of cream or ointment that just covers the end of an adult finger from the tip to the crease of the first joint when it comes out of an ordinary tube nozzle (see figure 1).

Different parts of the body require different numbers of finger tip units (FTU) of steroid used on them e.g. in adult one arm will need 3 FTUs whilst a 4-year old child would require just over ½ of the amount i.e. 1FTU for an arm and hand (see figures 2 & 3).



Age	Face and neck	Arm and hand	Leg and foot	Trunk (front)	Trunk (back including buttocks)
3-6 months	1	1	1½	1	1½
1-2 years	1½	1½	2	2	3
3-5 years	1½	2	2	3	3½
6-10 years	2	2½	4½	3½	5



Adjustments will be required if the whole area is not covered by eczema. 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. You will usually be given a set period of time in which to use the preparation. Any steroid that remains at the end of a treatment should not be passed on for use by anyone else.

Repeated prescriptions are not generally advised in cases of eczema since the condition can alter and it is important that the doctor see the skin to reassess the suitability of the treatment.

## Are topical steroids a safe treatment?

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 on which it is used and the age of the person concerned.

All these factors will be taken into consideration when a prescription is given to treat eczema. Pregnant women should consult their doctor regarding the advisability of continued use of their usual topical steroid preparation.

If used over long periods of time topical steroid can thin the skin making it appear transparent, fragile and over-susceptible to bruising. Blood vessels may also become more prominent.

With time the skin can become so badly damaged that it loses its elasticity so that 'stretch marks' develop. However, these effects usually only occur when potent steroids have been applied for a long time, either to the face or covered parts of the body such as the flexures.

Thinning can also occur when steroids have been applied under occlusion e.g. to the hands with plastic gloves or bags over and for this reason treatment of this type is limited to short periods of time under supervision of a doctor or nurse.

(Continued on page 3)

# FACTSHEET



(Continued from page 2)

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 young children. Be careful not to confuse with hydrocortisone butyrate which is a potent topical steroid.

Other possible side effects include increased hair growth of very fine hair and perioral dermatitis i.e. a spotty rash around the mouth.

It is important to bear in mind that these effects take several weeks to develop and will be avoided if potent preparations are limited in use and replaced by less potent preparations once they have brought a 'flare up' of eczema under control.

There is also a risk from topical steroids being absorbed into the blood through the skin. Again the likelihood of this occurring is directly linked to the amount of steroid used and the age of the person involved. The main problem relating to absorption of steroids is a slowing down of growth in children by suppression of internal glands.

It is for this reason that strong steroids will only be prescribed for short periods of time for young children and if required over long periods only under the supervision of, and monitoring by, a hospital specialist.

If used over long periods of time treatment with potent topical steroids is unlikely to be stopped abruptly and people will be 'stepped down' through lower potency preparations before steroid treatment is finished altogether.

Allergy to the steroid itself or to the base of the preparation can occur. If the eczema gets worse after using a particular steroid let your doctor know.

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.

New formulations have recently been developed which have the added advantage of once-daily usage, but it remains to be seen if these are less likely to cause many of the side effects of older steroids. Ask your doctor for up-to-date details.

## Summary

Topical steroids have now been in widespread use in this country for over 30 years and although side effects can occur this is usually because treatment has been used incorrectly.

The use of stronger topical steroids for short periods of time, decreasing the strength as the condition improves, will usually bring most flare-ups of eczema under control. If it does not, other problems such as infection, dryness of the skin or regular contact with a known allergen have been ignored.

Under 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 either 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, moisturise and protect the skin, thus providing the basis for everyday management of eczema and help reduce the need for topical steroid preparations.

*The National Eczema Society is grateful to Dr Andrew L Wright, Consultant Dermatologist, for his help in the preparation of this information sheet.*

### Further Information

Eczema Helpline  
0800 089 1122  
(Mon-Fri 8am to 8pm)  
email  
helpline@eczema.org

To join the NES  
020 7281 3553  
(Mon-Fri 9am to 5.30pm)  
membership@eczema.org  
www.eczema.org

### Disclaimer

These details are provided only as a general guide. Individual circumstances differ and the National Eczema Society does not prescribe, give medical advice or endorse products or treatments. We hope you will find the information useful, but it does not replace and should not replace the essential guidance given by your general practitioner, dermatologist and dermatology nurse.