



How to apply topical corticosteroids for the treatment of eczema

This fact sheet provides information to patients with eczema and their carers.

About topical corticosteroids

You or your child's doctor has prescribed a topical corticosteroid for the treatment of eczema.

For treating eczema, corticosteroids are usually prepared in a cream or ointment and are applied topically (directly onto the skin). Topical corticosteroids work by reducing inflammation and helping to control an over-reactive response of the immune system at the site of eczema. They also tighten blood vessels, making less blood flow to the surface of the skin. Together, these effects help to manage the symptoms of eczema.

There is a range of steroids that can be used to treat eczema, each with different strengths (potencies). On the next page, the potencies of some common steroids are shown, as well as the concentration that they are usually used in cream or ointment preparations.

Using a moisturiser along with a steroid cream does not reduce the effect of the steroid.

There are many misconceptions about the side effects of topical corticosteroids. However these treatments are very safe and patients are encouraged to follow the treatment regimen as advised by their doctor.

How to apply topical corticosteroids

How often should I apply?

Apply 1–2 times each day to the affected area of skin according to your doctor's instructions.

Once the steroid cream has been applied, moisturisers can be used straight away if needed.

Continue to apply until the eczema has cleared – there is no need to take a break from using the cream or ointment.

How much should I apply?

Enough cream should be used so that the entire affected area is covered. The cream can then be rubbed or massaged into the inflamed skin.

Remember – there is no need to “use sparingly”. As a rough guide, a quarter of a teaspoon is usually enough to cover the front of an adults' forearm.

Classes of topical corticosteroids

The class of topical corticosteroid prescribed by your doctor will depend on how severe the eczema is and where it is found on the body.

Potency refers to how active the steroid is – that is, how much of the steroid is needed to have an effect. The concentration refers to the amount of steroid in a given preparation.

Generally, potent and very potent steroids are used on severe eczema. A less potent steroid might be prescribed when the symptoms of eczema are controlled.

Class of topical corticosteroids	Usual concentration (%)
Class I: mild	
hydrocortisone	0.5 – 1.0
hydrocortisone acetate	0.5 – 1.0
Class II: moderate	
clobetasone butyrate	0.05
hydrocortisone butyrate	0.1
betamethasone valerate	0.02
betamethasone valerate	0.05
triamcinolone acetonide	0.02
methylprednisolone aceponate	0.1
triamcinolone acetonide	0.05
Class III: potent	
betamethasone dipropionate	0.05
betamethasone valerate	0.05 – 0.1
mometasone furoate	0.1
Class IV: very potent	
betamethasone dipropionate in optimised vehicle	0.05
clobetasol propionate	0.05

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