

# Emollients – Parent information

## Nurse Eczema clinic Children's Health Service

Emollients are heavy moisturisers that help manage and control eczema. Children and adults with eczema usually have dry and easily irritable skin.

When used adequately emollients have a number of important functions that will help your child

- Puts moisture back in the skin which relieves itching or if very dry, pain
- Where the skin is broken or weeping, will help the skin heal faster and feel more comfortable
- Decreases shedding of skin
- Improves skin barrier function so that the skin is not so irritated by conditions, allergens and less open to infection
- Decreases redness and swelling
- Decreases the length of time and strength of steroid you need to apply to the skin
- Bathing is important as this cleans the skin, removes crusting, scaling and decreases bacteria on the skin as well as rehydrating (puts moisture back into) the skin. If done well this will decrease the amount of emollient that must be applied during the day (and possibly at night). Ideally bathing should be daily but can be decreased as skin condition improves
- At the end of the bath it is important to rinse off with fresh water, and pat your child's skin dry. Whatever you put on the skin in the first 3-5 minutes after the bath will be absorbed ten times more than at any other time. (This is not so important when the skin is in good condition)
- Bathing daily is not always possible such as for a young adult. Therefore if showering then an emollient such as emulsifying ointment should be used as a soap substitute. Soap must not be used. When ever possible try to bath one to two times a week (or more often) as showering does not rehydrate the skin

To work, emollients may be used in a number of ways

### ***Bathing and Showering:***

- Used in the bath. The amount required depends on what your child's skin is like. For example if only dry with no obvious eczema use half to one handful of emulsifying ointment (emollient). If the skin is very dry, flaky and scratched then use 2- 4 handfuls. **Do not use soap** – this is drying and an irritant to the skin
- You can melt the emollient such as emulsifying ointment until it is like an oil and pour into the bath away from your child. Bath water can be as hot as you like if plenty of emollient is added. As the water cools the emollient will solidify. This is what you can use to massage into your child's skin wherever it is affected by dryness or eczema. (The emollient will not clog your bath or pipes, just rinse out of the bath thoroughly)
- Remember that most shampoos are soaps and if used please try to prevent getting on your child's skin. Emollients can be used instead of shampoos and will leave the hair shiny if rinsed out with fresh water. Emollients applied to the scalp will relieve scalp dryness or baby cradle cap. For thick hair melt the emollient until oil consistency before applying.
- The best time to bath is at night as this will keep your child's skin more moist through the night, helping them (and you) to sleep through

### ***On the skin:***

- Apply emollient regularly as required whenever your child's skin is dry, itchy, red or just feels rough. Only enough to put a shine on the skin is adequate. Apply as

often as needed even if only applied half an hour before or your child has just scratched the area, this may need to be several times a day. Once enough emollient is applied, this will help the skin to function by itself and less emollient will be needed. As you are aware this will change from day to day

- Remember the heavier the emollient i.e. the stickier, like emulsifying ointment it will last longer. So whilst it may be more difficult to apply it will need to be applied less often than lighter, easier to use emollients
- From eighteen months of age and sometimes younger, your child should be encouraged to be involved in their skin care. It is important they learn to apply emollient when itchy so the itch-scratch cycle can be broken. If as a parent or care giver you continue to only do the emollient yourself, this will become a frustrating chore which your child will increasingly sabotage and your child will continue to scratch
- If your child applies their emollient well themselves they still need your encouragement and support. When they are tired, as a parent you need to recognise when you should apply it for them or for difficult to reach places.

### ***Prevention:***

- Using emollients preventatively is the key to helping control eczema
- It is important to recognise what are irritants for your child's skin for example for the young child put emollient around their mouth, chin, and neck before and after eating; before and after going outside in the wind and/or cold; before and after your child plays in sand and water
- It is important that emollient is applied to affected areas just before going to sleep even if only just bathed an hour before. Your child scratches in the night because as the bed warms up their skin dries out and gets itchy
- Continue to use at least in the bath and/or shower and to the skin once a day even when the skin is in good condition

### ***Handy Hints:***

- Remember to use positive language with your child
- Only apply emollient yourself when you are feeling positive, if you are applying emollient when you are fed up, angry or tired (it is normal to feel this way!) even without a word being spoken, your child will know how you feel by how you touch and respond to them
- Remember when your child is scratching you can help relieve their itching, minimise damage to their skin and help their skin heal by applying emollient, even when the skin is scratched red and raw
- It is important to put the emollient in smaller containers so it can be available for wherever your child is/are i.e. bedroom, bathroom, kitchen, schoolbag, office desk. If emollient is in one room you or your child are less likely to apply when needed. If in smaller containers this will make heavier emollients such as emulsifying ointment easier to apply (softens with warmth) and decreases contamination of bacteria from fingers and skin
- When the skin is in good condition try to decrease your management so it is easy to increase when eczema flares

### ***The Benefits:***

- Your child's skin will become soft and smooth
- The redness, swelling and itching will decrease and possibly stop
- Less or no steroid will be needed
- A mild steroid can easily manage a child's eczema
- Broken areas will heal faster
- Your child will sleep better
- Your child will be able to work better (improved school work)
- Your child will have improved social relationships as they feel better
- You will have greater control and confidence in managing your child's eczema