

Emollients

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 you

- 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 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. 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
- Remember that most shampoos are soaps and if used please try to prevent getting on your 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. For thick hair melt the emollient until oil consistency before applying.
- The best time to bath is at night as this will keep your skin more moist through the night, helping you to sleep through

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 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 you. 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 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)

On the skin:

- Apply emollient regularly as required whenever your 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 if you have 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
- It is important for you to learn to apply emollient when itchy so the itch-scratch cycle can be broken. Once you are able to do this you will see an improvement in your skin and you will have greater control of your eczema
- It is important to involve loved ones such as close friends, your partner or parents. They can provide you with the support and encouragement you need to manage your eczema which is a chronic condition

Prevention:

- Using emollients preventatively is the key to helping control eczema
- It is important to recognise what are irritants for your skin. For example, apply emollient before and after going outside in the wind and/or cold; apply emollient after swimming or washing your hands
- It is important that emollient is applied to affected areas just before going to sleep even if only just bathed an hour before. You scratch in the night because as the bed warms up your 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 think in a positive manner and use positive language
- Only apply emollient 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!) it can make you feel resentful and negative about management that is effective for eczema
- Remember when you are scratching you can help relieve the itching, minimise damage to the skin and help the 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 you are i.e. bedroom, bathroom, kitchen, and office desk. If emollient is in one room you 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 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 to moderate steroid can easily manage eczema when adequate emollient is used
- Broken areas will heal faster
- You will sleep better
- You will be able to work better
- You will have improved social relationships as you feel better
- You will have greater control and confidence in managing your eczema