

TOP TIPS FOR TREATING

Sandra Lawton OBE (Nurse Consultant Dermatology and Queen's Nurse, Nottingham University Hospitals NHS Trust) suggests practical ways to manage eczema.

Caring for eczema can present many challenges on a daily basis. This article will provide you with some realistic and practical tips for managing the condition with emollients and topical steroids, and includes some age-specific advice. Before you start on your eczema journey you need to know what type of eczema you have, what your triggers are (causes of flare), how to treat it and what to do if it is getting worse or you think there may be an infection. (For more information visit the NES website www.eczema.org or DermNet NZ www.dermentnz.org)

Using and applying your treatments

You need to be clear about when and how to use your treatments – some will be used regularly throughout the day and others will be used to treat flares. If you are not sure about what you have been prescribed and how to use it, ask for a demonstration, information about the treatments and a written plan.

Your skin-care routine needs to be realistic and fit into your lifestyle. Don't run out of your treatments – when you have half left, order further supplies from your GP as most require 48 hours to process repeat prescriptions. If you pay for prescriptions (England), consider a prepayment certificate (visit www.gov.uk/get-a-ppc). Don't use treatments that have not been prescribed for you and be cautious about products purchased via the internet as many herbal remedies have been found to contain potent steroids.

For more information visit

www.mhra.gov.uk/Safetyinformation/Generalsafetyinformationandadvice/Herbalmedicines/Herbalsafetyupdates/Herbalskincreamswarningsandalerts/

If you are going on holiday and flying, check the size limit for hand luggage and pack the larger sizes in bags that are going in the aircraft hold.

Emollients

- Emollients should be used regularly throughout the day even when your eczema is well controlled.
- You should be offered a choice of emollients. This will be based on the severity of your eczema, your lifestyle and the time of year. You may need several products including a lighter and a greasier product.
- Emollients come in a variety of sizes – small pots, tubes, tubs and pumps – so make sure you have a selection according to your needs.

ECZEMA

- Emollients can be used for washing, showering and moisturising. Ask how the ones you have can be used.
- Emollients should be applied regularly throughout the day rather than applying them too thickly all in one go, which could irritate your skin and make you too hot.
- The recommended amount of emollient you should use is 250–500 g per week.



- Apply emollients in a smooth, downward motion in the direction of the hairs to prevent folliculitis (blocking of hair follicles).
- Some people like to keep emollients in a cool place before applying them.

Safety and emollients

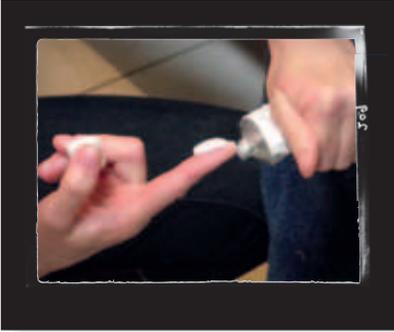
- Do not use aqueous cream as it can irritate the skin.
- Bandages, dressings and clothing in contact with paraffin-based products are easily ignited with a naked flame or cigarette, so take care near naked flames!
- Don't warm emollients in a microwave.



- If you are prescribed pots of creams or ointments, do not put your fingers in the pot. Decant the amount you need, using a clean spoon, and keep the lids on between applications to prevent infection.
- Be careful when bathing and showering with emollients as you could slip. After bathing or showering clean the bath or shower with hot water and washing-up liquid, rinse well and dry with kitchen towel. This prevents a build-up of grease and helps to clean the drains.

Topical corticosteroids

Topical corticosteroids (TCS) come in four different potencies – mild, moderately potent, potent and very potent. Be clear about what potency you are using, which part of the body it should be used on and for how long. Many steroids have a '%', which often confuses patients and does not indicate potency. For example, 1% hydrocortisone is classed as a mild TCS, while Betamethasone valerate (Betnovate) at 0.122% is a potent one. TCS also come in different formulations – creams, ointments, gels and lotions – some of which may include additional ingredients such as antibiotics. The potency and type of TCS used will be based on the area of the body being treated, the severity of your eczema and the product you prefer. If you are anxious about using TCS, discuss these concerns with your doctor or nurse.



Using the fingertip method for applying them (see www.patient.co.uk/health/fingertip-units-for-topical-steroids) or keeping a record of the size and number of tubes you are using helps your doctor or nurse to know how they are being used and if they need to be changed or stepped up to give you better control of the eczema.

Do not mix treatments together as this will dilute their effect and spread them to areas of the body that don't need them, increasing the risk of side effects. Leave a gap between applying emollients and active treatments: with topical steroids, leave 20–30 minutes; with Protopic, leave 2 hours.

Age-specific tips

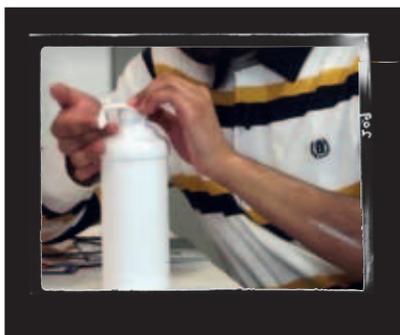
Babies and infants

- Immunisations should be given unless there is a known allergy to any of the ingredients. Some treatments, such as calcineurin inhibitors (not licensed for use in infants under 2 years), should be stopped before immunisations are given. Discuss any concerns with your medical team.
- If you think diet is a possible trigger for the eczema, don't change your baby's or child's diet without discussing your concerns with the medical team. If you suspect a severe allergic reaction, obviously avoid the foods and seek advice (visit www.allergyuk.org/types-of-allergy-menu/types-of-allergy).
- Do not use internet or high-street allergy testing. If an allergy is suspected, a specialist referral should be made and a focused allergy history undertaken.
- For babies, teething, coughs and colds are common triggers.
- The face of the weaning/teething/dribbling baby can be constantly wet, so increase the frequency of emollient applications, especially before feeding.
- Do not use baby wipes on the face, hands, etc. For the nappy area alcohol- and fragrance-free wipes should be used. Eczema generally does not affect the nappy area.
- Apply emollients at every nappy change.
- Shampoo should not be used for babies under 1 year of age. Emollients used for washing the skin can be used on the scalp and a shampoo suitable for eczema can be used from the age of 1 year.
- If your baby has cradle cap, use an emollient cream or ointment to soften the scale, and gently comb out with a soft tooth brush or hair brush. Do not use olive oil as recent research has shown that it can damage the skin. Further research is under way.
- For baby massage, use a light emollient rather than oils.

Nursery and school years

For further information see the NES Schools Pack.

- Arrange a meeting with the nursery or school staff and school nurse to discuss your baby's or child's individual care. An individual care plan should be implemented for their eczema.
- Discuss what activities your child may or may not undertake, and which may trigger a flare. Look into uniform options and PE kit as some clothes irritate and your child may not want to expose their skin to their peers.
- Check products are not being used that may irritate their skin – soaps, baby wipes, etc.



- Emollient pumps or tubes are preferable in school to prevent putting hands in pots.
- Emollients should be kept within easy access, not locked in an office.
- Ensure that, when emollients are applied in nursery or school, the emollient principles mentioned above are adhered to and that the emollients are applied in privacy, not in the toilets.
- Topical corticosteroids and other treatments (apart from antibiotics) should not be used at school, but monitored or applied at home.

- Explain to staff at your child's nursery or school how their sleep is affected by eczema.
- Explain to staff at the nursery or school how your baby or child is affected more generally by their eczema.
- If your child has head lice, emollients can be used to comb through the hair.

Young people and adults

- As your child gets older, they should be encouraged to take responsibility and make decisions regarding their eczema care with your support.
- Time away from home for trips, sleepovers, etc., will need planning.
- School work, exams and hobbies, as well as interviews and career choices may be challenging. Work or careers with wet work could exacerbate the eczema.
- Be aware that normal teenage behaviour will prevail but your son or daughter should be aware that certain things should be avoided: hair dyes, henna tattoos and body/ear piercing have the potential to cause a flare and irritant or allergic contact dermatitis.
- Eczema usually improves with age but for some it persists into adulthood. Others will still have that eczema tendency and could flare for the reasons above.
- Emollients should be continued, even when the skin is clear of eczema, both for moisturising and washing, bathing or showering.
- Emollients can be used for shaving.

- Find make-up products that are hypoallergenic, perfume- and colour-free and test an area before using. Eczematous skin is more sensitive to products and you can develop allergies to them. Keep things as simple as possible.
- If spots or acne become a problem, discuss this with your nurse or doctor as TCS and greasy emollients may make these worse.
- If you are worried about how eczema is affecting you or your child, discuss these concerns with your doctor or nurse.
- If you start to have problems with urinary or faecal incontinence, ask to see a continence nurse for advice. Don't try to hide the problem by using baby wipes or over-washing and sanitary protection rather than products suitable for continence problems.
- If you have varicose eczema and you cut or injure your leg, don't treat it yourself – seek medical advice as this may prevent the leg becoming ulcerated.
- Have a well-balanced diet. If you are anaemic, it can make your skin itchier.
- If you are given a sedating antihistamine, be careful not to trip or fall. Avoid alcohol and, if they make you too drowsy, speak to your nurse or doctor.

Older person

- As you get older, the skin becomes drier and different types of eczema can develop, so you may need to step up your emollient regimen.
- Emollient bath oils in warm water can be soothing but they make the bath very slippery.
- Put the emollient into the bath after you get in rather than before.
- If you cannot get into a bath, then you can still use emollients in the shower or in a bowl of water if you wish.
- Ask for help if you are finding it hard to put the eczema treatments on.
- If you find you have problems with haemorrhoids (piles) or constipation, discuss this with your doctor before buying products such as haemorrhoid creams, which may contain ingredients that could irritate or cause an allergy.

Other treatments for eczema

During your eczema journey you may be prescribed a variety of treatments – from creams to be applied to the skin to medicines that are taken orally, and phototherapy.

You should receive written information with your treatments, and a care plan is useful.

Don't be afraid to ask the following **W** questions:

What	is the treatment?
Why	has it been prescribed?
When	should I use it?
Where	should it be used?

If you have any tips of your own that you think might be helpful for others, please feel free to share them on our Facebook page at www.facebook.com/eczemasociety