

# Emollient Patient Information Leaflet

## What are Emollients?

Emollients (sometimes called moisturisers) are creams, ointments and lotions which help to prevent dry skin and itching by replacing the natural oils that help keep water in our skin to prevent it becoming dry cracked, rough, scaly, and itchy.

## Why use Emollients?

Applying emollients to your skin regularly is worthwhile, although it can be time consuming. It can prevent eczema and other dry skin conditions from becoming worse. Using emollients may reduce or remove the need for other treatments that may cause side effects *e.g.* steroid creams.

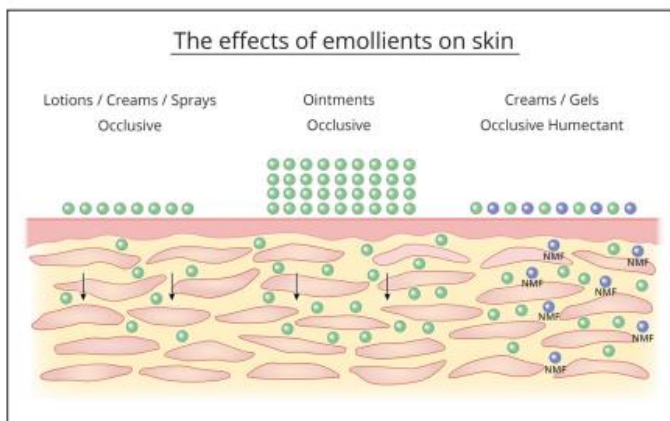


Image from PCDS website.

The gaps between the building blocks of skin are where moisture leaves the body. Emollients fill these gaps.

Occlusives form a barrier on top of the skin which traps moisture in *e.g.* Vaseline.

Humectants encourage a Natural Moisturising Factor (NMF) which works up from the base layers to rehydrate the skin from within.

## Which emollient should I use?

There are a wide range of emollients available but essentially, they all work to keep water in the skin. You may need to try more than one emollient before you find the one that suits you best.

## Which Emollient is best?

Ointments tend to cause fewer problems with skin sensitivity as ointments, unlike creams, do not contain preservatives. Ointments are greasier than creams, so stay on the skin longer and tend to work better. However, applying ointments can be messy.

There is no "best emollient." The type (or types) to use depends on the dryness of the skin, the area of skin involved and patient preference. You may need to try more than one emollient before you find the one that suits you best.

## What is the difference between emollients?

The difference between lotions, creams and ointments is their content of oil (lipid) and water. The oil content is lowest in lotions, intermediate in creams and highest in ointments. The higher the oil content, the greasier and stickier it feels and the shinier it looks on the skin.

### Are there any possible side effects from emollients?

Prescription emollients tend to be non-perfumed. However, some creams contain preservatives, fragrances, and other additives. Some people become sensitised (allergic) to an ingredient. This can make the skin condition worse rather than better. If you suspect that you are sensitive to an emollient then see your doctor for advice and try an alternative.

**Flammability** – Potential risk with all emollients, including paraffin-free. For further information see [MHRA Drug Safety Alert](#)

### How to use Emollients:

- ✓ Wash hands and apply the emollient thinly (just so the skin glistens), gently and quickly in smooth downward strokes in the direction of hair growth.
- ✓ Apply as often as needed to keep the skin supple and moist, usually at least 3 - 4 times a day but some people may need to increase this to up to every hour if the skin is very dry.
- ✓ As a rule, ointments need to be applied less often than creams or lotions for the same effect.
- ✓ Apply emollients after washing to trap moisture in the skin.
- ✓ Avoid massaging creams or ointments in or applying too thickly as this can block hair follicles, trap heat and cause itching.
- ✓ Emollients can be applied before or after any other treatments e.g. steroid creams, but it is important to leave at least 30 minutes before applying the next treatment.

**Do not stop using your emollient if your skin looks better as skin can flare up again quickly**

### Bathing and Washing:

- ✓ Avoid bubble baths and soaps as they can be irritating and dry the skin.
- ✓ Bathe regularly in tepid (lukewarm) water only. Regular bathing cleans and helps prevent infection by removing scales, crusts, dried blood, and dirt.
- ✓ Use an emollient as a soap substitute (most emollients can be used in this way). Apply the emollient prior to washing and directly afterwards onto damp skin.
- ✓ Bath and shower emollients offer no advantage over emollients and are no longer recommended for use in children or adults.
- ✓ When drying do not rub with a towel but pat the skin dry to avoid damage to the skin.
- ✓ Take care when entering the bath/shower after applying emollients as they make surfaces slippery.

### Further Information:

National Eczema Society: [www.eczema.org](http://www.eczema.org)

British Skin Foundation: [www.britishskinfoundation.org.uk](http://www.britishskinfoundation.org.uk)

National Psoriasis Foundation: [www.psoriasis.org](http://www.psoriasis.org)

Primary Care Dermatology Society – atopic eczema: [www.pcds.org.uk/clinical-guidance/atopic-eczema#management](http://www.pcds.org.uk/clinical-guidance/atopic-eczema#management)

NHS Choices: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/emollients/>

British Association of Dermatologists: [www.bad.org.uk](http://www.bad.org.uk)