

# Ask the doctor about ...

## TOPICAL CORTICOSTEROIDS



Dr. Miriam Weinstein

Dr. Miriam Weinstein is a Toronto based dermatologist and paediatrician with expertise in eczema.

Dr. Miriam Weinstein was invited to share her expertise on topical corticosteroids and how they are typically used in the treatment of eczema. As with all medications, topical corticosteroids pose a risk for side effects or adverse events and should only be used under the supervision of a qualified health care provider.

### WHAT ARE TOPICAL CORTICOSTEROIDS?

Topical corticosteroids are a group of medications used to treat the inflammation (i.e. redness, swelling, pain, and itch) of eczema and are applied directly on the skin. Sometimes these medications are called steroids or cortisones. They work by briefly changing the chemicals in the skin as a way to reduce inflammation. Corticosteroids are made by the body naturally and help to control many body functions.

### ARE TOPICAL CORTICOSTEROIDS SAFE?

Topical corticosteroids have been used to treat eczema for more than 50 years, and when used under the direction of a health care provider, the risk of side effects is low. The use of topical corticosteroids should be discontinued when the skin is healed; however, it is important to allow the skin to heal completely before stopping use. Fearing side effects, many people commonly apply too little rather than too much medication, or stop using it too soon before the flare is completely gone. It is important to keep in mind that while side effects do exist, the risk is low when topical corticosteroids are used appropriately. On the other hand, untreated and under-treated eczema can have a negative impact on different areas of life, such as sleep, mood, social activities, stress, ability to focus, and family life.

### WHAT DOES THE PERCENTAGE NUMBER ON TOPICAL CORTICOSTEROIDS MEAN? HOW IS A 2% PRODUCT OF ONE NAME LESS STRONG THAN A 0.5% PRODUCT OF ANOTHER NAME?

Topical corticosteroids range in strength (or 'potency') from mild to extra strong. The percentage on the label of a topical corticosteroid refers to the type of medication it contains. There are many different types, and the percentages between products are not comparable. For example, a 2% concentration of one product may be much milder than a 0.05% of another product even though it is a higher number.

Different strengths or potencies of medications are also used for different areas of the body. A mild treatment may be okay to use on the face, armpits, groin, genitals, neck, and folds, whereas other areas may require a stronger medication. For your hands and the soles of your feet, or other areas that could be lichenified (where the skin has thickened due to long periods of scratching or uncontrolled eczema), stronger medications may be used for short periods of time. It may be helpful to ask your health care provider for a written care plan to make sure you have clear instructions on which medication is applied to which area of the body, and for how long.

### WHEN CAN I STOP USING MY TOPICAL CORTICOSTEROIDS?

Generally speaking, you should see some improvement in the skin within a couple of days of treatment. You want to continue using it until the inflammation and redness is gone. Sometimes this can take up to two weeks. Commonly, people quit using topical corticosteroids once they see a small improvement; however, it is important to continue treating the affected areas until they are completely healed. If you are using medication on the same areas of the body for longer than two weeks' time, speak to your health care provider.

### WHEN I USE MY TOPICAL CORTICOSTEROID AS DIRECTED BY MY HEALTH CARE PROVIDER, MY FLARE GOES AWAY, BUT IT ALWAYS COMES BACK EVENTUALLY. WHY DOES THIS HAPPEN?

Eczema is a chronic condition, meaning it may clear up for periods of time after treatment, but then flares again. At this time, there is no cure for eczema so we focus on moisturizing the skin, avoiding triggers when and where possible, and treating flares at the first sign of inflammation (e.g. redness or rash or itch), and until the skin is healed completely. If your skin continues to flare despite treatment, speak to your health care provider about any questions you may have related to the use of topical corticosteroids, other medications, and your overall eczema treatment plan.