

Emollients

Emollients are moisturising treatments you put onto your skin. You can get them as creams, ointments, lotions and sprays.

You can use some of these instead of soap. You can also get an emollient wash or soap substitute to wash with.

Emollients cover your skin with a film. This protects your skin and helps you lose less water from your skin.

Skin problems emollients help with

You can use an emollient to help with dry, itchy or scaly skin problems. These include [eczema](#), [psoriasis](#) and ichthyosis.

Emollients help stop skin problems getting worse (inflammation). They also help stop them from coming back (flare-ups).

You may have to try a few different emollients or try a mix to find the best one for your or your child's skin. For example, you may decide to use a cream during the day and an ointment at night.

Types of emollients

There are lots of different types of leave-on emollients - creams, ointments, lotions and sprays. Some have added ingredients to reduce itching or prevent infection.

Creams

Creams are good to use during the day. They're not very greasy and they soak into your skin fast.

Ointments

Ointments are good if you have very dry, thickened skin. They are good to use at night. They're greasy, thick and very moisturising.

Ointments are usually free of preservatives - this makes them better for sensitive skin. But do not use ointments on weeping eczema. This is where pus is coming out of damaged areas of skin.

Lotions

Lotions are good for hairy areas of skin. This is because lotions are thin and spread easily. But they're not very moisturising.

They are also good for damaged areas of skin such as weeping eczema. This is where pus is coming out of damaged areas of skin.

Sprays

Sprays are good for hard-to-reach areas. They are good for sore or infected skin that you should not touch. They soak into your skin fast.

Soap substitutes or emollient washes

Normal soaps, shampoos and shower gels usually dry out your skin. They can make skin conditions like eczema worse.

You can use many leave-on emollients like creams, lotions and ointments to wash with. But you can also buy an emollient wash or soap substitute. If you use this instead of normal soap for handwashing and washing your body, it can help your skin.

How to get emollients

Talk to your GP or pharmacist. They will tell you about which type of emollient will work best for your skin condition.

You can buy emollients from a pharmacy without a prescription. If your skin problem is bad, talk to your GP. You may need a stronger treatment.

When to put on emollients

Emollients are very safe and you cannot overuse them.

You can put emollients on:

- as often as you like to keep your skin well moisturised and in good condition
- after washing your hands, taking a bath or showering - this is when your skin most needs moisture
- when your skin feels dry or tight - emollients will replace lost moisture
- before doing activities that can irritate your skin such as swimming or gardening
- your hands and face often - they are on show outside more than any other part of your body
- a baby's hands and cheeks before mealtimes - this stops them getting sore from food and drink

You can use emollient soap substitutes for:

- handwashing

- showering
- in the bath

If you or your children need to use an emollient often, keep some in small pots or tubes at home and school or work.

How to use emollients

1. Use a clean spoon or spatula to take emollients out of a pot or tub - you could spread the infection to the pot if you use your finger.
2. Put the leave-on emollient cream, ointment, lotion or spray straight onto your skin.
3. Smooth it into the skin gently in the same direction that your hair grows to help stop blocking hair follicles - do not rub it in.

If you are using an emollient after washing, pat your skin dry and then put it onto your skin. This is to make sure it soaks in.

Fire risk

⚠ Warning

Keep away from fire, flames and cigarettes when you use any emollient.

If you or your child's dressings, clothing and bedding have been in contact with an emollient they can easily catch fire. This happens especially if you use paraffin-based emollients.

Wash fabrics at high temperatures - it does not remove the emollient completely, but it may reduce the build-up.

Using soap substitutes (emollient wash products)

1. Mix a small amount (about a teaspoonful) of soap substitute in the palm of your hand with a little warm water.
2. Spread it over damp or dry skin - it will not foam like soap, but is as good at cleaning your skin.
3. Rinse with water.
4. Pat your skin dry - be careful not to rub it.

If your skin stings from the product and does not settle after rinsing, talk to your pharmacist. They can tell you about a different one you could try.

Slippy floors, showers and baths

Emollients and soap substitutes can make your bath or shower slippery.

Take care by:

- using a non-slip mat, towel or sheet
- washing your bath or shower afterwards - wear protective gloves and use hot water and washing-up liquid
- drying your bath or shower with a kitchen towel

Using emollients with other skin treatments

Sometimes your GP will tell you to use a steroid cream or another treatment for your skin condition.

Wait at least 30 minutes after putting on your emollient before using a treatment like this.

This is so the emollient does not:

- weaken the treatment
- spread it to areas of skin that do not need it

Side effects

Emollients can sometimes cause a skin reaction, such as:

- a burning or stinging sensation that does not settle after a few days of treatment - this is usually caused by an ingredient in the emollient
- blocked or inflamed hair follicles (folliculitis) that may cause boils
- rashes on the face that can make acne worse

If you have any of these symptoms, talk to a GP, nurse or pharmacist.

Aqueous cream side effects

Aqueous cream is useful to wash your skin with. But it can cause skin reactions such as burning, stinging, itching and redness for some people who use it as a moisturiser.

This can happen to children with atopic eczema especially.

Page last reviewed: 14 April 2023

Next review due: 14 April 2026

HSE Live - we're here to help

Monday to Friday: 8am to 8pm

Saturday: 9am to 5pm

Sunday: Closed

[Sunday: Closed](#)

[Bank holidays: Closed](#)

[Freephone: 1800 700 700](#)

[From outside Ireland: 00 353 1 240 8787](#)

[HSE Facebook](#)

[HSE Instagram](#)

[HSE TikTok](#)

[HSE YouTube](#)

[HSE LinkedIn](#)

[HSE X \(Twitter\)](#)

[Complaints and feedback](#)

[Emergencies](#)

[Cookie settings](#)

[Cookie statement](#)

[Accessibility](#)

[Privacy statement](#)

[Disclaimer](#)

© Health Service Executive