

# EMOLLIENTS

## AND HOW TO USE THEM



### What are emollients?

Emollient is simply the medical word for a moisturiser. They help soothe the skin and provide relief from itching and dryness. **Patients who do not have a diagnosed dermatological condition or risk to skin integrity (breakdown of skin) should purchase emollients over the counter e.g. from pharmacies or health and beauty stores.**

### How do emollients work?

An emollient replaces natural oils that help keep water in the skin to prevent it becoming dry, cracked, and itchy. It also traps moisture in the skin and forms a protective oily layer on the outer skin, which helps skin to repair and improve hydration.

### Types of emollients

Emollients can be used either as soap substitutes or as a leave on emollient. There are many different types of emollients and they can be classified according to how they are used and how greasy they are.

**Ointments:** Greasy in nature, they are usually made of white soft paraffin or liquid paraffin and **are ideal for very dry or thickened skin** - normally applied at night, they do not usually contain preservatives and are therefore less likely to cause skin reactions.

**Creams:** Have a mixture of oil and water. Less greasy than ointments, therefore easier to spread onto the skin. Must be used frequently and liberally to prevent the skin from drying out. Good for daytime application.

**Lotions:** Contains the most water and least oil, so are the least effective in moisturising the skin. They usually contain preservatives (ingredients that help to protect the product from bacteria/germs and increase its shelf life) which may cause skin irritation. Lotions are useful for hairy areas such as scalps and areas of weepy skin.

### How often should emollient treatment be applied?

Emollients should be applied as frequently as possible. This should be at least three times daily, and ideally applied **four to six times a day** (every 3 hours). Emollient use should be continued even when the skin condition has improved. Emollients can and should be applied at other times during the day e.g. in extreme weather in order to provide a **barrier** from the cold. **Reviewing the need of your prescribed emollient should be carried out by your GP annually.**

### Which emollient is best?

There is no 'best emollient'. The type (or types) to use depends on the dryness of the skin, the area of the skin involved, and what is comfortable and acceptable to you.

If you only have mild skin dryness and do not experience flare ups frequently a lotion/cream maybe the best option.

For moderate to severe dryness, a thicker cream or ointment would be ideal to use. Areas of weeping eczema will usually be managed with a cream/lotion, as ointments will tend to be very messy.

### How to apply emollient treatment?

**Step 1:** Wash your hands to remove invisible bacteria.



**Step 2:** Do not put fingers into tubs to scoop out the emollient, as you may introduce bacteria into the emollient tub. To reduce the risk of infection, transfer some emollient onto a clean plate using a clean dessert spoon. If you have cream in a tub with a pump top, you can pump directly onto your hand.



**Step 3:** Emollients should be applied to the skin in a downward direction of hair growth and left in a thin layer to soak in - this can take up to 10 minutes. Please do not rub emollients in.



