

Emollients — advice for use

Emollients can be divided into three categories:

1. Ointments — greasy, oil-based emollients that contain no preservatives so are less likely to cause irritation. They are ideal for night time usage and when the skin has flared.
2. Creams — lighter emollients that are easier to apply than ointments; they are good for daytime use but contain preservatives, which can cause irritation
3. Lotions — contain more water than oil so are very light and cooling; they contain preservatives (so can irritate) and need to be applied more frequently than other emollients, therefore larger quantities are often needed

Choosing an emollient

PATIENT CHOICE IS PARAMOUNT WHEN SELECTING AN EMOLLIENT FOR REGULAR USE

Emollients are most effective if used regularly. Empowering patients to choose their own emollient is established good practice and helps to increase concordance.

- **For acute exacerbations — greasier emollients (ie, ointments) are more effective**
- **For maintenance treatment (between exacerbations) — lighter emollients (ie, creams and lotions) are often more tolerable.**

If a rash is weeping or exudating, use a cream or lotion. These are non occlusive and will allow evaporation to occur. An ointment will slip off the skin.

If a rash is dry and scaly, use an ointment. The occlusive base will help to retain moisture.

Tips when using emollients

- Use a pump dispenser, or allocate an old spoon to scoop the emollient out of a tub — this helps to prevent contamination
- Frequent and liberal application of emollients is advised. The skin should glisten after application and not feel too greasy
- When using an emollient to wash, advise the patient as follows:
 - Pat skin dry after washing to avoid further damaging the skin
 - Apply emollients within 3 to 4 minutes of getting out of the bath or shower to “trap” moisture
 - Discourage frequent bathing; more than 15 minutes in the bath can lead to further dryness of the skin due to the body’s own natural moisturising factor leaching out into the water
 - A bath or shower will become slippery if patient use an emollient wash — advise patients to be cautious
- If using an emollient and a topical corticosteroid concomitantly, the emollient should be applied first with a gap of a few minutes before applying the corticosteroid
- Do not use an emollient for two hours before applying tacrolimus (Protopic®) ointment