



THE AUSTRALASIAN COLLEGE
OF DERMATOLOGISTS

How do I apply topical corticosteroids for the treatment of eczema?

Atopic eczema (also known as Atopic Dermatitis) is a chronic inflammatory disease. It often starts in infancy, affecting almost 30% of young children in Australia,^{1,2} but can continue throughout adolescent and young adulthood years.

The effect of eczema on a patient's quality of life depends on the severity, and if left untreated can impact concentration, behaviour, self-esteem, and confidence, particularly amongst children.³ Although there is no cure for eczema, topical corticosteroids are a safe and effective treatment for managing eczema.

The Australasian College of Dermatologists (ACD) has developed a fact sheet that provides information on how to apply topical corticosteroids for the treatment of eczema for patients and their parents and caregivers. For more information about corticosteroids, see ACD's A-Z of Skin page, [Topical Steroids](#).

Recommendations



ACD recommends applying an ample volume of the topical corticosteroid 1-2 times per day to the entire affected area of the skin.



ACD recommends the use of topical corticosteroids as a safe and effective treatment for managing active atopic eczema.

What are topical corticosteroids?

Topical corticosteroids work by reducing inflammation and helping to control an over-reactive response of the immune system at the site of eczema. They also tighten blood vessels, making less blood flow to the surface of the skin. Together, these effects help to manage the symptoms of eczema.

There are a range of steroids that can be used to treat eczema, each with different strengths (also known as potencies). For more information about potencies of some common steroids, as well as the concentration they are usually used in cream or ointment preparations, ACD's Consensus Statement on [Topical Corticosteroids in Paediatric Eczema](#).

Corticosteroids are usually prepared in a cream or ointment and are applied topically (directly onto the skin).

¹ Robertson C, Dalton M, Peat J, et al. Asthma and other atopic diseases in Australia children. Australian arms of the International Study of Asthma and Allergy in Childhood. Med J Aus 1998; 168: 434-438.

² Martin P. The epidemiology of infantile eczema (thesis). Melbourne: Royal Children's Hospital, University of Melbourne; 2011.

³ Gelmetti C, Boralevi F, Seit  S, et al. Quality of life of parents living with a child suffering from atopic dermatitis before and after a 3-month treatment with an emollient. Pediatr Dermatol 2012;29(6):714-18

How often should I apply topical corticosteroids?

You should apply the prescribed topical corticosteroid 1-2 times each day to the affected area of the skin according to your doctor's instructions.

Once the steroid cream has been applied, moisturisers can be used straight away if needed. Moisturisers do not reduce the effect of the steroid.

Continue to apply until the eczema has cleared. There is no need to take a break from using the cream or ointment. Topical corticosteroids do not fix all rashes.

How much topical corticosteroids should I apply?

Enough cream should be used so that the entire affected area is covered. The cream can then be rubbed or massaged into the inflamed skin.

There is no need to "use sparingly". As a rough guide, one quarter of a teaspoon is usually enough to cover the front of an adult's forearm.

Will I experience any side effects when using topical corticosteroids?

There are many misconceptions about the side effects of topical corticosteroids.

It is uncommon or rare to experience any significant side effects associated with topical corticosteroid use, when you are following the treatment regimen as advised by your doctor.

What are the classes of topical corticosteroids?

The class of topical corticosteroid prescribed by your doctor will depend on how severe the eczema is and where it is found on the body.

Potency refers to how active the steroid is – that is, how much of the steroid is needed to have an effect. The concentration refers to the amount of steroid in a given preparation.

Generally, potent and very potent steroids are used on severe eczema. A less potent steroid might be prescribed when the symptoms of eczema are controlled.

This factsheet is also available online. For more topics, visit dermcoll.edu.au or scan the QR code.

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Dermatologists are doctors who are the medical specialists in skin health.

The Australasian College of Dermatologists (ACD):

- Trains and supports dermatologists
- Advocates for better skin health for our communities
- Sets the clinical standard in dermatology



This is a general guide only and does not replace individual medical advice. Please speak to your doctor for advice about your situation. The ACD is not liable for any consequences arising from relying on this information.