

Eczema Management: Topical Steroids (in children)

Are topical steroids safe?

Topical steroids are medicines such as ointments or creams that are applied on the skin. They reduce inflammation and itching. These come in many brands and strengths. Use these only on red, itchy, or thickened areas of eczema and **not** on normal skin. Your provider will specify which steroid preparation can be used safely and for how long it should be used. For severe itching, an antihistamine (oral medication) may be prescribed, but this is not always effective. An application of wet wraps is often more effective.

Continued use of **very strong** steroid ointments or creams can cause thinning of the skin, stretch marks, accentuation of blood vessels in the skin, and absorption of cortisone into the body. Infants are at greater risk for increased absorption into the body. Prolonged use on the eyelids may lead to eye cataracts and glaucoma. For these reasons, strong topical steroids should be used sparingly and only intermittently. The weaker strength topical steroids are safe for children and infants if used as directed by your provider. There is a low risk of absorbing amounts of these that would cause unwanted side effects.

How do I use a topical steroid?

Your provider may prescribe a topical steroid. Typically, these are used in what is called a “burst and taper” manner to maximize effectiveness.

For example:

- Apply Hydrocortisone 2.5% ointment two times per day for 2 weeks.
- Then apply it two times per day **on weekends only** for 4 weeks.
 - When applying only on weekends, this means you do not apply the prescription product Monday-Friday. However, you should continue to soak and seal every day.

Why is it written like this?

Steroids are powerful medications. They decrease the irritation associated with eczema and a variety of conditions. However, they have potential side effects and over time, lose effectiveness on the skin. This is why it is essential you use them as your provider recommends. Using them in a manner where you are aggressive for 2 weeks, and then taper off for several weeks allows for safe and effective use. It is never appropriate to use them daily for extended periods of time unless specifically told to do so by your provider. Never use them as moisturizers.

Types of topical steroids

Some topical steroids should only be used on specific parts of the body. In general, milder steroids are used for the face, body folds (like the groin and armpits) and for children. It is very important to use the right steroid in the right place for the best safety and effectiveness.

Be careful with labels, names of steroids can be deceiving. Just because something has “0.5%” next to the name instead of “0.1%”, does not mean it is a stronger medicine. Be sure you understand what medication your provider is recommending and where it is best used. If possible, write the instructions on the box like this: "for face and folds", "for body", "for eyelids".

How much is the right amount?

It will depend on the area of skin that is affected. A “fingertip unit” (FTU) will describe the amount of cream or ointment needed. See figures 1-3 below for the size of a fingertip unit, and the amount of FTUs to use for children and adults.

Figure 1


This image shows 1 Finger Tip Unit (FTU). **1 FTU is** the amount of cream that stretches along the last section of an adult finger.

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Figure 2

Table showing the amount of fingertip units to use for children. To determine how many fingertip units to use, find the child’s age on the left side of the table and follow it to the column that has the correct skin area on the top of the table



SKIN AREA	FACE AND BACK OF NECK	ARM AND HAND	LEG AND FOOT	CHEST AND BELLY	BACK AND BUTTOCKS
AGE	Finger tip unit (FTU) or 0.5 g of ointment				
3-6 MONTHS	1	1	1.5	1	1.5
1-2 YEARS	1.5	1.5	2	2	3
3-5 YEARS	1.5	2	3	3	3.5
6-10 YEARS	2	2.5	4.5	3.5	5


CHILDREN | Table: Amount of ointment for children

Figure 3

Table showing the amount of fingertip units to use for adults. To determine how many fingertip units to use, find the skin area where the ointment is to be applied on the top of the table and locate the fingertip unit below it.

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SKIN AREA	FACE AND BACK OF NECK	ARM	LEG	CHEST AND BELLY	BACK AND BUTTOCKS	HAND, ELBOW, KNEE, FOOT
Finger tip unit (FTU) or 0.5 g of ointment						
	2.5	4	6	7	7	1 FTU each

ADULTS | Table: Amount of ointment for adults

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