

How to Use Topical Steroids

Steroids are hormones that are produced naturally in our bodies.

Hydrocortisone, made by our adrenal glands, is one steroid that has an anti-inflammatory effect. (Other kinds of steroids are the sex hormones, like estrogen and testosterone - but those are not anti-inflammatory.)

Medical versions of hydrocortisone can be used as ointments and creams, to reduce inflammation in the skin. Very little of the steroid is absorbed through the skin, so they do not really affect the rest of the body. Mild strengths are available over the counter. Stronger ones are available by prescription.

Ointment or Cream?

Ointment is better than cream if skin is dry or rough (it keeps moisture in). Cream is better if skin is wet and weepy (it helps to dry the skin out). Always apply as thinly as possible.

How much to use?

Steroid ointment or cream is dispensed as "fingertip units" (FTUs).

1 fingertip unit = a ribbon of ointment from the last knuckle-crease to the tip of the finger (index finger).

To treat an area the size of:

Back of hand or top of foot = 1/2 FTU

Both sides of hand or half of neck = 1 FTU

One whole foot/ankle = 2 FTUs

One arm = 3 FTUs

One leg = 6 FTUs

Chest and belly = 7 FTUs

Back and buttocks = 7 FTUs

For children: Measure the area using your hand (fingers closed), and apply 1/2 FTU per hand (1/4 FTU for 1/2 hand).

More medicine is absorbed through thin skin (face, genitals) and areas of skin that rub together. Apply extra-thinly to these areas.

How to Use

~ Apply the cream or ointment thinly.

Rub it in. Don't touch your eyes or mouth.

~ Wash your hands or fingers afterward.

~ Apply once a day if possible.

Use no more than twice a day.

~ If using other creams, ointments or lotions, wait 30-60 minutes before applying over the medicine.

~ Use topical steroids as medicine only, never as moisturizer.

~ Do not use under airtight bandages, diapers, or anything that does not allow air circulation.

~ Do not use on the face unless prescribed this way by your doctor, for no longer than a week.

Why all the warnings?

- Steroids can thin the skin. This may make you vulnerable to easy sunburn, and can also change the color of the skin, usually temporarily.
- Remember, it is always possible to have an allergic reaction to a medication, even an anti-inflammatory one, because of the carrier ingredients, colors, scents, and preservatives that may be in them. If you think you are having an allergic reaction, call your doctor or pharmacist.
- As usual, if you think you are having an allergic reaction that makes it hard to breathe, go directly to the emergency room.

