

Emollients: understanding the different types and what they do

Have you been told to use an emollient or moisturiser as part of your skin care routine? Here, we explain what the difference is between emollients and other available moisturisers so that you can pick the right one for your skin.



The word 'emollient' means 'to make soft', which is exactly what products with emollient properties do (BAD, 2023). Many people use the word emollient and moisturiser interchangeably, but they are slightly different (BDNG, 2012).

Emollients are medical moisturisers that are used for dry, itchy or scaly skin conditions. Chronic oedema and venous disease can cause a variety of skin changes, such as thickening, hardening, dryness and the development of flaky, brown, scaly

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skin (also known as hyperkeratosis). Often, emollients are advised for these conditions.

How emollients work

Emollients have been used for hundreds of years, and work by covering the skin with a protective film that traps in moisture, encouraging a build up of moisture beneath. In contrast, moisturisers are absorbed by the skin surface (BDNG, 2012), actively adding water and hydrating it. Emollients and moisturisers are very different from cosmetic moisturisers which are perfumed and have additives, such as anti-aging creams (National Eczema Society, 2019).

Skin care is an essential part of venous leg ulcer and chronic oedema management, and a daily, basic skin care routine will help to maintain skin integrity (Wound Care People, 2019). Skin care consists of three key components, cleansing, drying and emollient therapy (Wound Care People, 2019). Bland emollients should be used immediately after washing to trap moisture in the skin (BDNG, 2012).

Which emollient should I use?

There are many types and brands of emollients, ranging from runny lotions to thick ointments. The difference between

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lotions, creams and ointments is the proportion of oil (lipid) to water. The lipid content is lowest in lotions, intermediate in creams and highest in ointments (Patient, 2023).

The higher the lipid content, the greasier and stickier it feels

and the shinier it looks on the skin. As a general rule, the higher the lipid content (the greasier and thicker the emollient), the better and longer it works but the messier it is to use (Patient, 2023).

Simple or advanced?

Emollients can also be described as simple or advanced. Simple emollients provide a thin layer over the skin surface as described earlier, whereas advanced emollients contain an active ingredient to make them even more effective. Some emollients contain added ingredients, such as antimicrobials (antiseptics) which destroy bacteria, humectants which draw water into the skin, anti-itch ingredients, ceramides which help to keep the balance of fats necessary for healthy skin, and oatmeal which has antioxidant properties.

However, the inclusion of an active ingredient has the potential to increase the risk of skin reactions (Newton, 2021).



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Leave-on or wash-off?

Emollients can be further divided into 'leave-on' or 'wash-off' products (Newton, 2021).

Leave-on products include:

- **Ointments:** have the highest oil content and work very well with very dry, scaly skin. They are not as easy to apply and are not popular for use during the day because of their greasy appearance on the skin. Ointments contain less water than other emollients and therefore require fewer preservatives. This makes them ideal for people who react to preservatives.
- **Creams:** are less greasy, feel light and cool on the skin, are easier to apply

and more acceptable than ointments. For this reason many people prefer them to ointments during the day. They are not as effective on very dry skin and require more frequent application than an ointment.

- **Lotions:** have a high water content which make them runny. They can have a cooling effect on the skin but are less effective at hydrating the skin than creams or ointments. They are easier to put on the skin but need to be applied more frequently. Because they contain more water, they often have preservatives which can cause sensitivity.
- **Gels:** are made from oil and water. When the gel is applied to the skin, the oil is released and is able to stay



in place for longer. They are useful for use on the face, scalp and head.

- **Sprays:** often contain products such as paraffin and a propellant to force the emollient from the can. They can be useful when the skin is painful to touch and for hard to reach areas.

Wash-off products are designed to be used with water and are mostly oil-based bath and shower products. They are used to increase moisture levels on the skin during showering or bathing which may be reduced when using ordinary wash products such as soaps, wipes and bubble bath. Some emollients can be used as soap substitutes which can further hydrate the skin. Soap substitutes may take a little getting used to as they don't foam like ordinary products, but they are nevertheless effective at cleansing the skin.

Hazards

Emollients can cause a fire if in contact with a naked flame, such as a candle, cigarette or an open fire. This is a hazard especially if the emollient has soaked into bandaging or clothing. Clothing and bed linen should be washed regularly. Try to avoid getting emollient on fabric covered furniture such as sofas. Tell your relatives or carers about your treatment and ask how they can help you to reduce fire risk (MHRA, 2021).

Emollients can also make the bath or shower very slippery. It is therefore advisable to use a non-slip mat. When you have applied emollients

always wash your hands before picking anything up as your hands will also be slippery (BAD, 2023).

Emollients will not cure your skin condition but will help make you feel more comfortable. They are an essential part of a treatment plan for any skin condition which causes dryness and inflammation. The best emollients are the ones that work well for you and that you like using, because you will use them more often. ▶

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