

# Topical Corticosteroids

To reduce skin inflammation



Your doctor has prescribed a cortisone-based drug to apply to your skin. This sheet explains how to use your medication and dispels some of the myths and misconceptions about topical corticosteroids.

## Why did my doctor prescribe a topical corticosteroid?

You have an ailment that causes skin inflammation. This can result in:

- redness
- plaques
- itching

Corticosteroids that are applied to the skin (topical) are **very effective** at soothing inflammation and reducing these symptoms.

## What form does this drug come in?

This drug is available in several forms: creams, ointments, lotions, gels, foams, etc. Each form comes in different strengths. Your doctor has prescribed the product most suitable for you.

## Are there any precautions to take?

Yes. It is important to **only use the product you have been prescribed**, as it has the proper strength. It is also adapted to the area of skin to be treated. If there are different areas to be treated, you may need more than one product.

### Never lend your medication to anyone.

You cannot use the concentration of active ingredients to accurately compare two products. For example, a cream with 0.1% of active ingredient X may be much stronger than a cream with 2% of active ingredient Y.

## How do I apply the product?

### Cover the entire skin area(s) affected.

One to two applications per day is sufficient.



See step-by-step application instructions in Appendix 1, on page 3.

## For how long do I need to use this product?

Duration of treatment varies. Generally, you will need to apply the product as soon as symptoms appear and continue until they disappear. If symptoms return (as they will with eczema or psoriasis, for example), begin treatment again.

## Are there any side effects?

**Side effects are very rare. Cortisone applied to the skin does not have the same effects as when taken by mouth or injected.**

Some people needlessly fear topical corticosteroids, leading them not to use their medication properly. This often causes their skin problem to worsen.

**A few of the common myths about these drugs are dispelled in Appendix 2, on page 4.**

## Is it true that corticosteroids will make my skin thinner?

It can happen, but it is very rare if you carefully follow your doctor's instructions. Generally, thinning only occurs after long-term use of high-strength cortisone and only in the area of application. It is not dangerous.

If thinning occurs:

- 1 Stop the treatment. Your skin will tend to regain its usual appearance.
- 2 Call your doctor. He/She may prescribe a product that is not as strong.

Note that skin is more likely to thin in creased areas (e.g. groin, armpits), under a bandage and where it is already naturally thinner (e.g. eyelids, the skin covering the testicles).

*The content of this document in no way replaces the recommendations and diagnoses made, or the treatment suggested by your health professional.*

## Is it safe to take these drugs while pregnant or nursing?

Yes, if your doctor deems it necessary. However, if you are nursing and need to apply the product to your nipples, apply it only **after** nursing.

## When should I consult my doctor?

Consult your doctor if your symptoms are not improving or are worsening.



## Where should I store my medication?

Store it in a safe place (out of the reach of children), at room temperature. Make sure the lid or cover is properly closed after using.

## Who do I contact if I have questions?

Write down any questions so that you can ask your pharmacist or your doctor at your next appointment. For any health concern related to this treatment, you can also call the **CHUM Patient Health Line** at **514 890-8086**.



### USEFUL RESOURCES

Other health sheets published by the CHUM are available. Ask for those that might fit your situation.



You can also find them on our web site  
[chumontreal.qc.ca/fiches-sante](http://chumontreal.qc.ca/fiches-sante)

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## APPENDIX 1: HOW TO APPLY THE PRODUCT

Follow these steps to properly apply your medication. Although the product in this example is a cream, the instructions apply to all forms of topical corticosteroids.



Thoroughly wash your hands before and after applying.



- 1-** Apply a small amount of cream on your hand (palm or back of the hand).



- 2-** Scoop up a bit of the cream with your finger.



- 3-** Apply to the area that requires treatment. Gently spread. Apply a generous layer.



- 4-** Be sure to cover the entire area to be treated. The cream can even be spread a little beyond the target area.

**The cream does not need to fully penetrate. Your skin will absorb it.**

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Here are a few common myths about cortisone-based drugs applied to the skin.

### MYTH

**Cortisone-based drugs need to be applied in a thin layer.**

**FACT :** It is important to apply a sufficient amount of the product to completely cover the area to be treated. Your doctor could even instruct you to apply a thick layer.



### MYTH

**This drug will affect your hormones.**

**FACT :** Generally, cortisone that is applied to the skin does not enter the bloodstream. It can therefore not disrupt your hormones. In extremely rare cases, long-term use on large areas of the body can affect the hormones. However, this is reversible. Your doctor will monitor you more closely should this occur.

### MYTH

**This medication cures eczema.**

**FACT :** Unfortunately, eczema is a chronic skin condition with no cure. **Topical corticosteroids are effective at improving and controlling your skin condition**, but will not cure it.

### MYTH

**You can develop spots if you go out in the sun with this drug on your skin.**

**FACT :** If darker or lighter spots develop and persist, it is due to your skin condition rather than the drug. **Topical corticosteroids will not make your skin more sensitive to the sun.** There is no contraindication to going outside after applying such products.

As for everyone, it is recommended that you apply sunscreen before going out in the sun. Sunscreen can be applied before or after applying the topical corticosteroids.



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