

Creams and ointments

Overview

Medicated creams and ointments contain different ratios of water and oil but are applied in the same way. The active ingredients in creams and ointments are things such as topical steroids, antibiotics or fungal treatments but some may not have any active ingredients such as moisturising creams (or emollients)

Process

1. Perform hand hygiene and put on disposable gloves
2. Squeeze the required amount of cream onto the fingertip and apply downwards in the direction of hair growth. Apply enough cream to cover the area being treated with a thin layer of the cream or ointment. Refer to figure 10.
3. Remove gloves and perform hand hygiene

Topical steroids – how much do I use?

It can be hard to know how much cream or ointment to apply to an area. If you apply too little, it may not work. If you apply too much, there may be a risk of side effects.

The fingertip unit

The fingertip unit is a simple way to measure how much cream or ointment to apply.

One fingertip unit is the amount of cream or ointment, squeezed out of a tube, from the tip of an adult's index finger to the first crease in the finger.



One fingertip unit is enough to cover an area of skin twice the size of a flat adult hand with the fingers together. For example, if the area of skin to be treated is the size of four flat adult hands, two fingertip units of cream or ointment should be applied each time.

You can measure the area of skin to be treated by holding a flat adult hand, with the fingers together, over the affected skin.

Fingertip units can also be used for children. A fingertip unit is measured on an adult index finger (as above) and then applied to the child.

The table below has some examples of the number of fingertip units needed for different parts of the body.

Age of patient	Number of adult fingertip units to apply each dose				
	Face and neck	Entire arm and hand	Entire leg and foot	Front of chest and abdomen	Back and buttocks
3–12 months	1	1	1½	1	1½
1–3 years	1½	1½	2	2	3
3–6 years	1½	2	3	3	3½
6–10 years	2	2½	4½	3½	5
>10 years (including adults)	2½	4	8	7	7

References: Long CC, Mills CM, Finlay AY. A practical guide to topical therapy in children. Br J Dermatol 1998;138:293-296.
Bewley A et al. Expert consensus: time for a change in the way we advise our patients to use topical corticosteroids.
Br J Dermatol 2008;158:917-920.

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Figure 1 - Australian Medicines Handbook Topical Steroids - how much do I use?

Risk/Considerations

- ⚠ Apply treatment creams before using a moisturiser

⚠ Do not put hands in tubs of cream as this can spread infection, use a clean spoon or spatula