

TOPICAL CORTICOSTEROIDS

Basic Information

- Topical corticosteroids are used for inflammatory skin conditions
- The benefits of topical corticosteroids are only temporary or palliative
- If you had an isolated exposure to something that has precipitated an allergic reaction, you can expect the rash to clear without any further problems
- For chronic skin conditions such as psoriasis or atopic dermatitis, it is best to combine topical corticosteroids with other non-corticosteroid types of treatment to limit side effects from prolonged continuous use of topical corticosteroids.

Potency of Topical Corticosteroids

- High potency products include betamethasone dipropionate, clobetasol and halobetasol
- Mid potency products include triamcinolone 0.1% cream and mometasone
- Low potency products include over the counter 1% hydrocortisone cream or ointment.
- Prescription strength 2.5% hydrocortisone is somewhere between low and mid strength
- The higher the potency, the greater the risk of the side effects listed in this handout.
- Thinner and more delicate skin is more susceptible to topical corticosteroid side effects.
- Children are more susceptible to topical corticosteroid side effects.

Corticosteroid Vehicles

- Creams are suited for most purposes.
- Ointments have the consistency of vaseline and are used on extremely irritated or raw areas and on delicate skin such as the eyelids or lips. Ointments are also more potent than creams.
- Liquids are used on the scalp
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How to use these medications

- Apply a thin layer, just enough to rub into the skin.
- For an isolated rash, apply to affected area only.
- For multiple areas of rash, apply to affected region or regions
- Topical corticosteroids may be applied for one to two weeks as instructed, but should **NOT** be used continuously after two weeks without instructions from Dr. Cohen.
- After two weeks, high potency topical corticosteroids should never be used more than 2-3 times weekly for areas on the trunk and extremities or one to two times weekly on the face, genitals, underarms, groin, neck or other thin skinned areas. Use of mid to high potency topical corticosteroids on delicate or thin skinned areas is used only under special circumstances and should be kept to a minimum. Low to mid potency products may be used up to three days weekly on the trunk and extremities and two days weekly on more delicate skin, if needed.
- These medications may be used intermittently from time to time for flare ups, but should NOT be used continuously.
- Continuous use is more likely to result in very thin skin, bruising, stretch marks and/or resistance to treatment. There is also an increased risk of developing systemic side effects from absorption through the skin into the bloodstream. Systemic effects of corticosteroids include weight gain, fluid retention, increased blood pressure, changes in mood, infections, diabetes, muscle weakness, adrenal suppression and serious problems with the bones and joints. Some or all of these side effects may be permanent.

Adverse Effects (More Common with Improper use of the Medication)

- Thin skin, bruising, stretch marks
- Rebound or relapse of skin rash
- Allergic skin rash or other skin reactions such as itching, burning or stinging. These reactions are more likely with gels and liquids.
- Pimples around the hair follicles and/or worsening of various kinds of acne.
- Worsening of bacterial, fungal, parasitic or viral skin infections
- Topical corticosteroids may be absorbed into the bloodstream and have systemic effects as listed in the section above.
- Prolonged use around the eyes may result in glaucoma and/or cataracts.
- Increased facial hair is reported, but I have not personally witnessed this side effect.

Special Circumstances

- Use during pregnancy should be limited to very short term. Tell Dr. Cohen if you are pregnant.
- Use with caution if you are breast feeding and avoid application to the breast area.

Stop the medication and call Dr. Cohen if you develop any problems with the medication. Also stop the medication and call Dr. Cohen if your condition worsens on treatment. If your skin condition can not be kept clear after a course of treatment, additional testing may be necessary to look for underlying causes or problems.