

How often should corticosteroids be applied for atopic eczema?

Understanding NICE guidance –
information for people with atopic
eczema, their families and carers,
and the public

August 2004



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To order copies

Copies of this booklet can be ordered from the NHS Response Line; telephone 0870 1555 455 and quote reference number N0617. A version in Welsh and English is also available, reference number N0618. Mae fersiwn yn Gymraeg ac yn Saesneg ar gael hefyd, rhif cyfeirnod N0618. The NICE technology appraisal on which this information is based, 'Frequency of application of topical corticosteroids for atopic eczema', is available from the NICE website (www.nice.org.uk). A short version of the guidance (a 'quick reference guide') is available from the website (www.nice.org.uk/TA081quickref guide), or from the NHS Response Line, reference number N0616.

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What is NICE guidance?

The National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) is part of the NHS. It produces guidance (recommendations) on the use of medicines, medical equipment, diagnostic tests and clinical and surgical procedures within the NHS in England and Wales.

To produce this guidance, NICE looks at how well the medicine, equipment or procedure works and also how well it works in relation to how much it costs. This process is called an appraisal. The appraisal process involves the manufacturer of the medicine or equipment for which guidance is being produced and the organisations that represent the healthcare professionals, patients and carers who will be affected by the guidance.

NICE was asked to look at the available evidence on how often people with atopic eczema should apply medicines called corticosteroids to the affected skin. NICE was asked to provide guidance that will help the NHS in England and Wales decide how often corticosteroids should be applied.

What is atopic eczema?

People with atopic eczema (also known as atopic dermatitis) have areas of red, inflamed, itchy skin that is often covered with fluid-filled blisters. Damage to the skin from scratching can cause bleeding, infection and thickening of the skin (also called lichenification).

Atopic eczema is the most common type of eczema. Atopic eczema usually begins in early childhood, and may continue to flare up from time to time throughout life.

People who inherit a tendency to allergies are most likely to get atopic eczema. Environmental factors such as house dust mites, pollen, tobacco, air pollution and low humidity may cause atopic eczema to start or to flare up.

What are topical corticosteroids?

Corticosteroid drugs are related to natural hormones produced by the body. Corticosteroids are used to treat flare-ups of atopic eczema. They are applied directly to the affected areas of skin (as creams or ointments, for example) to reduce inflammation (pain, heat, redness and swelling) and itching. Creams, ointments and other preparations containing corticosteroids that are applied directly to the affected area are called topical corticosteroids (often shortened to 'topical steroids').

The different topical steroids vary in potency (how much they reduce inflammation). They are described as mild, moderately potent, potent or very potent. Different preparations of a steroid may also vary in concentration (how much of the steroid they contain).

The most common side effect of topical steroids is that the skin becomes thin and easily bruised (this is called skin atrophy). This is most likely to happen in areas where the skin is already thin, such as the face or inside the bends of the joints, and is a particular problem in children. The skin may recover gradually when treatment is stopped, but it may never recover completely. Permanent skin damage is more likely if potent or very potent steroids are used excessively, or for long periods.

Because of their side effects, topical steroids are not used continuously. They are used for short periods to treat flare-ups of atopic eczema.

What has NICE recommended on how often topical corticosteroids should be applied for atopic eczema?

During the appraisal, NICE's Appraisal Committee read and heard evidence from:

- high-quality studies of topical corticosteroids
- doctors with specialist knowledge of atopic eczema and its treatment
- individuals with specialist knowledge of the issues affecting people with atopic eczema
- organisations representing the views of people who will be affected by the guidance (because they have, or care for someone with, the condition or because they work in the NHS and are involved in providing care for people with the condition)
- the manufacturers of topical corticosteroids.

The evidence is summarised in the full guidance (see page 10 for details). More information about the studies is provided in the Assessment Report for this appraisal (see page 10 for details). The appraisal did not cover other treatments for eczema, such as emollients.

NICE has made the following recommendations about the use of topical corticosteroids to treat atopic eczema within the NHS in England and Wales. The recommendations do not apply to topical steroid preparations that also contain other medicines, such as antibiotics.

NICE has recommended that corticosteroids should not be applied to the affected skin of people with atopic eczema more than twice a day.

NICE has recommended that if there is more than one type of topical corticosteroid that would be appropriate for a person's eczema, then the cheapest one should be used.

What should I do next?

If you or someone you care for has atopic eczema, you should discuss this guidance with your doctor or specialist.

Will NICE review its guidance?

Yes. The guidance will be reviewed in July 2007.

Further information

The NICE website (www.nice.org.uk) has further information about NICE and the full guidance on frequency of application of topical corticosteroids for atopic eczema that has been issued to the NHS. The Assessment Report, which contains details of the studies that were looked at, is also available from the NICE website. A short version of the guidance (a 'quick reference guide') is available on the website and from the NHS Response Line (reference number N0616).

NICE has published guidance on using medicines called tacrolimus and pimecrolimus for treating atopic eczema. Information for the public is available from the website and the NHS Response Line (reference number N0687 for a version in English, N0688 for a version in English and Welsh).

If you have access to the Internet, you can find more information about atopic eczema on the NHS Direct website (www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk). You can also phone NHS Direct on 0845 46 47.



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