

What's the difference? Creams, lotions, ointments and more...



By Matthew Ladda and Dr. Patrick Fleming

When walking down the aisles of a pharmacy or opening your medicine cabinet, you might notice words such as “cream,” “lotion” or “ointment” on topical medicines.

These words are not simply synonyms of one another, but rather describe distinguishing factors that make the agent more or less appropriate for a given concern or body area.

Medications applied to the skin consist of an “active” ingredient (a drug) mixed into a base. Examples of bases include ointments, creams, lotions, pastes, gels and foams. Some medications on the market exist in multiple forms, such as those offered in both cream and ointment formulations. There are important differences among bases that can influence factors such as how moisturizing a given topical medication is, as well as its greasiness, spreadability and cosmetic appeal. In this article, we look at some of these key differences among bases.

Ointments

Ointments (e.g., petroleum jelly) consist mostly of oil with only small amounts of water. Ointment bases

provide excellent moisturization and help stop moisture from evaporating from the skin. As such, they are generally used to treat dry areas or lesions, particularly straight after a



bath. They are ideal for broken or “raw” skin as they tend not to sting. However, their greasy nature means that ointments can be messy and difficult to wash off. Medications in ointment bases also tend to be stronger than the same medication in a cream or lotion.

Creams

Creams are emulsions of oil in water, with water making up the biggest portion. Creams are generally more cosmetically elegant than ointments and are often favoured for their ability to disappear when rubbed onto skin. Although they aren't as moisturizing as ointments, creams are less greasy and less messy.

Lotions

Lotions consist of a powder finely mixed into water and (sometimes) oil. They can generally be thought of as more liquid than creams because they have a greater amount of water. Lotions evaporate after being applied to the skin, and the cooling and drying feeling this produces can help soothe areas that are itchy or oozing. Lotions are also easily applied to hairy areas. However, because of their higher water concentration, lotions provide less moisturization than ointments or creams. They also can sting on broken skin because they may contain some alcohol.

Pastes

Pastes are composed of powders mixed into an ointment. Given the significant powder component, pastes tend to be less greasy than ointments. They are also “stiffer” and move around less on the skin, making them difficult to rub off.

Gels

Gels are alcohol- or water-based mixtures that liquefy when put on the skin. They leave a thin and greaseless film on the skin after drying, making them a cosmetically elegant base that is ideal for hairy areas. However, gels tend to be more drying than other topical bases so they aren't the best choice if you need moisturization. Gels also can be irritating if applied to open wounds.

Foams

Foams are pressurized aerosols that spread easily when applied to the skin. They are often more cosmetically acceptable than other bases for use in hairy areas. Foam-based medicines are sometimes more potent than other formulations.

Key messages

With all the options available, selecting the best product for your particular skin condition can be a daunting task. However, having a better understanding of what goes into the making of each formulation will help you to select one that is suitable for your needs. If you're ever in doubt, ask your doctor or pharmacist for advice. [CS](#)

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10 GREAT WAYS TO Be nice to your skin



- 1 Get to know your skin type:** One of the ongoing mistakes that people make is using the wrong product for their skin type. Check labels and ask for advice from a knowledgeable professional. Sometimes what looks nice in the package won't be so wonderful on your skin.
- 2 Be conservative:** Don't apply too much product, less is more sometimes. Using creams or lotions sparingly may save you money but it will also give your skin the opportunity to absorb what it needs.
- 3 Try a patch test:** Experts suggest using a small amount of a new product on your inner arm to see how it reacts.
- 4 Is it expired?** After a while, some skincare products lose their effectiveness and could even have a negative effect on your skin. If in doubt, throw it out.
- 5 Skin changes:** What works today may not be the best for you forever. As we age our skin changes. Re-evaluate your needs on a regular basis and seek professional advice if you notice a lotion or cream is no longer doing the job.
- 6 Quit smoking now:** Aside from its other risks, smoking causes premature aging, wrinkling, and will increase your likelihood of being diagnosed with skin cancer.
- 7 Watch your drinking:** A glass of wine or cocktail isn't bad for you—however, over time, excessive drinking can cause increased skin sagging. Moderation is the key.
- 8 Nighttime cleansing:** It's not a great idea to sleep with your makeup on, or dirt on your face, overnight. Experts suggest by sleeping in your makeup, you're taking a higher risk of breakouts on your skin.
- 9 Too much exfoliating:** If you scrub too much, you might irritate your skin and make it dry. Try exfoliating just once a week for dry skin and twice a week for oily skin.
- 10 Exercise regularly:** Research shows that when you get moving, your blood flow increases, which helps your skin stay healthier.