

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.



AUSTRALIAN MEDICINES HANDBOOK

Prepared by the Australian Medicines Handbook, August 2010. Updated May 2012.

www.amh.net.au