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## Topical Steroids

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Topical steroids are a class of medicines widely used in dermatology. They are effective for many skin conditions, including poison oak, atopic dermatitis, and psoriasis. They work by reducing the amount of inflammation in the skin. (Inflammation is what causes much of the redness and itching associated with rashes.)

Topical steroids can come in many forms, such as creams, ointments, and solutions. Different topical steroids can also vary significantly in strength. It is important that you use the appropriate strength for the skin condition that is being treated.

### Some Common Topical Steroids

- ❖ Very Low Strength
  - Hydrocortisone 0.5%-1% (available over-the-counter)
- ❖ Low Strength
  - Desonide 0.05%
- ❖ Moderate Strength
  - Triamcinolone acetonide 0.1%
- ❖ High Strength
  - Fluocinolide 0.05%
- ❖ Extremely High Strength (up to 600 times as strong as hydrocortisone!!!)
  - Clobetasol propionate 0.05%

### How They Are Used

Topical steroids are usually applied once or twice a day as needed to affected areas. It is important to note that certain parts of the body are more sensitive to the effects of topical steroids than other parts of the body. For instance, the face, neck, underarms, and groin are extremely sensitive. This means that a topical steroid which causes no problems on the hands or feet may cause major side effects if used on the face.

Also, the length of treatment is very important in determining the likelihood of side effects. In general, topical steroids are meant to be used only short-term (around 1-2 weeks). Long-term continuous use can be associated with higher risk of side effects. However, your doctor may recommend a course of treatment longer than 2 weeks if appropriate for your particular situation. I don't recommend using a topical steroid for any condition other than what was discussed with your doctor. This is how a lot of people get problems.

### Side Effects

Topical steroids can have both local and systemic side effects. **Some side effects, such as thinning of the skin and stretch marks, are permanent!** Local side effects include:

- ❖ Thinning of the skin (atrophy) and stretch marks (striae)
- ❖ Acne and rosacea
- ❖ Easy bruising
- ❖ More prominent blood vessels on the skin surface (telangiectasias)
- ❖ Increased risk of skin infections (such as impetigo or fungus infections)
- ❖ Glaucoma and cataracts if used on or near the eyes

If a strong topical steroid is used for a long time over a wide area of the body, systemic side effects can occur. These are similar to what you can get with steroid pills such as prednisone, and can include fluid retention, suppression of the body's own hormonal systems, bone loss, and increased risk of systemic infections.