



Emollients & Risk of Fire/Burns.

Information for healthcare professionals (updated November 2020)

NHS

East London
NHS Foundation Trust

There is a fire risk with **all paraffin-containing emollients**, regardless of paraffin concentration and the **risk cannot be excluded with paraffin-free emollients**. Emollients can transfer from the skin onto clothing, bedding, dressings, and other fabric. Once there, they can dry onto the fabric and build up over time. In the presence of a naked flame, fabric with emollient dried on is easily ignited. Although emollients are not flammable in themselves or when on the skin, when dried on to fabric they act as an accelerant, increasing the speed of ignition and intensity of the fire. This accelerant effect significantly reduces the time available to act to put out clothing or bedding fire **before serious and fatal burns are sustained**.

Emollients are an important and effective treatment for chronic dry skin conditions and people should continue to use these products. However, patients/carers must be advised of the fire risk associated with the build-up of residue on clothing and bedding and so can take action to minimise the risk.



Advice for patients and their families when using any paraffin-containing products:

- **Instruct patients not go near naked flames or smoke** because clothing or fabric such as bedding or bandages that have been in contact with an emollient or emollient-treated skin can rapidly ignite.
- **Confirm patient's smoking status** and emphasise advice to smokers accordingly.
- **Counsel patients on medical oxygen** of the fire risk and precautionary measures. Medical oxygen is non-flammable, but it does strongly support combustion. Extra caution should be taken with all emollients. **Paraffin based products should NOT be used.**
- Counsel on the fire risk associated with the **build-up of residue on bedding/clothing**; wash regularly to reduce residue build-up. Washing clothing/fabric at a high temperature may reduce emollient build-up but not totally remove it. **Fire risk remains at any level of residue.**
- Counsel on the risk associated with using **large quantities**; application to the skin over large body areas, or in large volumes for repeated use for more than a few days (e.g. application of 100g or more at once or over a short period) .

Resources:

- The full safety update can be accessed from the MHRA website here: [MHRA Drug Safety Update \(Dec 2018\)](#).
- Further safety advice and resources from the MHRA include posters and a patient leaflet can be accessed here: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/safe-use-of-emollient-skin-creams-to-treat-dry-skin-conditions>
- The **Emollient Guidelines and Formulary in Primary Care** for Newham/Tower Hamlets/Waltham Forest CCG (Nov 2019) can be accessed on the ELFT intranet.

References:

- 1) MHRA Drug Safety Update (Dec 2018): Emollients: new information about risk of severe and fatal burns with paraffin containing and paraffin-free emollients. <https://www.gov.uk/drug-safety-update/emollients-new-information-about-risk-of-severe-and-fatal-burns-with-paraffin-containing-and-paraffin-free-emollients>
- 2) PresQIPP Bulletin 49: Cost effective emollients with no, or low paraffin content. May 2013: <https://www.presqipp.info/media/1268/b49-emollients-20.pdf>
- 3) The Emollient Guidelines and Formulary in Primary Care for Newham/Tower Hamlets/Waltham Forest CCG (Nov 2019)
- 4) MHRA Guidance (July 2020): Safe use of emollient skin creams to treat dry skin conditions. <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/safe-use-of-emollient-skin-creams-to-treat-dry-skin-conditions>
- 5) MHRA Drug Safety Update (August 2020): Emollients and risk of severe and fatal burns <https://www.gov.uk/drug-safety-update/emollients-and-risk-of-severe-and-fatal-burns-new-resources-available>