



# Risk of severe and fatal burns with use of emollients

## There is a risk of severe and fatal burns with all emollients, including paraffin-free products

### ADVICE TO HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS

Advise people to continue to use their emollient(s) as directed. They are vital to help manage many different skin conditions and it is important that people continue to use them as directed by their doctor, nurse or pharmacist.

**Ensure emollient users and their carers understand the fire risk with these products and can take action to minimise the risk:**

- Instruct them to not smoke, cook or go near any naked flames or heat source (gas, halogen, electric bar or open fire) whilst wearing clothing or dressings that have been in contact with emollients or emollient treated skin. If they cannot do this advise on measures to do so safely eg, use safety lighters or e-cigarettes; remove long sleeved or loose clothing before cooking; put on a thick uncontaminated shirt, overalls or apron; move chairs further away from the open fire or other heat source.
- Be aware that washing clothing and bedding at a high temperature may reduce emollient build up but does not totally remove it. It is important to minimise the risk in additional other ways (as above).
- For complex cases contact the local fire and rescue service for advice and support.

### QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS FOR HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS AND CARE WORKERS

#### What are emollients?

Emollients are important and effective moisturising treatments that are widely used to help manage dry, itchy or scaly skin conditions such as eczema, psoriasis and ichthyosis. Emollients are also used to manage venous leg ulcers. They are applied directly to the skin to soothe and hydrate it and cover the skin with a protective film to trap in moisture.

#### What is the risk?

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 a clothing or bedding fire before serious and fatal burns are sustained. The fire may also be harder to extinguish than a 'clean' fabric fire.

This risk applies to all emollients, including paraffin-free emollients. The risk increases with use of greater amounts of emollient, more frequent application and greater surface area of application.

#### How big is the risk?

The risk is very small in the context of the widespread use of these products over many years.

The MHRA has received a total of 15 reports of fatal burns injuries as a result of fires and 2 non-fatal fire incidents in which emollients were suspected to have been involved. We are also aware that between 2010 and July 2020, more than 50 fatal incidents were identified by Fire and Rescue Services in the England in which emollient were known to have been used by the victim or were present at the fire premises.

#### Which emollient products are affected?

All emollients (lotions, creams, ointments, gels, sprays, soap substitutes) carry this risk. This includes all paraffin-base products regardless of % paraffin content, and paraffin-free products. No emollient can be considered 'safer' than another with regard to this risk.

#### Resources to support the safe use of emollients

For resources to support safe use of emollients including an information leaflet for patients, posters and video go to <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/safe-use-of-emollient-skin-creams-to-treat-dry-skin-conditions>