

How to Apply a Cream or Ointment to the Skin

BACKGROUND

Creams or ointments may be prescribed for pets for a variety of reasons. Bacterial or fungal infections are the main reasons a veterinarian will recommend applying medication to your pet's skin. This type of treatment can be done very easily at home. The most important treatment goal is allowing the cream or ointment to remain in contact with the skin for a prescribed period of time. Generally, your veterinarian will shave the hair around the area where the medication should be applied to prevent the hair from becoming matted with the medication.

GETTING STARTED

Equipment needed:

- Medication ointment/cream[†]
- Gloves[†]
- Gauze[†]
- Antibacterial solution[†]
- E-collar or anti-lick device^{*}

When applying a cream or ointment to your pet's skin, you should wear latex (or similar) medical exam gloves to avoid coming into contact with potential bacteria or fungi your pet may harbor. Gloves will also prevent your skin from coming into contact with the medication.

TROUBLESHOOTING BEFOREHAND

The skin that is affected should begin healing within the first few days of ointment or cream application. In serious conditions, wound healing may take longer. However, if you notice an increase in any of the following symptoms, you should contact your veterinarian immediately:

- Onset or increase in fluid discharge from the area of concern
- Increased redness, swelling, or heat in the area
- Increased pain
- Spreading of the condition to other areas of the body
- Inability to apply the ointment or cream (for example, if your pet is not allowing it, or because you feel you are not doing it correctly)

If at any time your pet shows resentment to having this done, stop the procedure and call your veterinarian for further advice. The area may be too painful to treat without additional medications, and it is imperative that you not put yourself at risk of being bitten or scratched. This may also be an indication that the disorder is worsening and should be rechecked immediately.

PROCEDURE

- In calm (or asleep) pets, this can be done with just one person, but with young excited animals, it may be necessary to have one person distracting and/or holding the pet while another person applies the ointment or cream. The whole process should take around 5 minutes; if it is too complicated or difficult, notify your veterinarian to discuss alternatives.
- If possible, first clean the affected area with a dilute lukewarm (body temperature), soapy antibacterial solution (handwashing

soap, chlorhexidine, or povidone-iodine [Betadine]), especially if dirt or grit is present in the area where the ointment or cream will be applied. The cleansing solution can be applied to a gauze pad and used to gently wipe away any dried debris. If the area is crusted and hard to clean, the moistened gauze pad should be held lightly on the affected area for 5 minutes, allowing the solution to penetrate the debris and make removal easier. If the area is already clean, this step is unnecessary.

- It is imperative that your pet not lick the area where you have applied the ointment or cream. Some medications that work well on the surface of the skin can be harmful to pets when swallowed. It is also important the medication have as prolonged contact with the skin as possible. If pets can lick the area of concern, an Elizabethan collar (E-collar) should be applied. These collars can be purchased from your veterinarian or any pet supply store. If the area of concern is located on the foot, the pet may still be able to reach the lesion, and a sock may have to be applied, preventing any licking. T-shirts may also work as a barrier to prevent pets from licking affected areas.
- To apply the ointment or cream, first squeeze enough for one application from the tube or vial onto your gloved index finger. This is like putting toothpaste on a toothbrush. The amount should be sufficient to cover the area with a thin film, and this may vary from a pea-sized dollop for smaller areas to several strips for larger areas. If unsure, you can review this with a veterinary technician in person or on the phone.



After the affected area has been cleaned and dried, apply the ointment and spread it with a gloved finger so it leaves just a thin film.

- Remember that the ointment is cooler than body temperature and may feel cold to your pet when you apply it, especially on raw or sensitive wounds. Apply it with a light touch, using small, gentle, circular motions of the finger on the area of skin affected. There should be no pain or resentment (see beginning of this section about safety). The goal with most ointments and creams is to leave a thin film over the entire area so the medication penetrates gradually over several hours.

^{*}From the veterinary hospital/clinic.

[†]From the veterinary hospital/clinic or from a pharmacy/drugstore.



An Elizabethan collar is indispensable to prevent licking at the ointment-coated skin for virtually all areas of the body.

AFTERWARDS

Once you have finished cleaning the area, discard any remaining antibacterial solution, used gauze, and gloves. To prevent contamination, fresh solution and new gauze should be used for each treatment. Replace the cap on the medication, and place in a safe area out of reach of children and pets.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

My pet is with me all day. Why do I need to place an E-collar on him/her?

A pet can lick or damage the skin in a way that sets back healing by days or weeks in just a few seconds. Unless constant supervision can be ensured, an E-collar is extremely important because it can prevent otherwise unnecessary return trips to the vet. An E-collar provides continuous protection from chewing and licking. Although this method of protection can be awkward for some pets at first, it is a temporary measure; most dogs and cats adjust well over time.

How often do I need to clean the area and apply the medication?

Your veterinarian will give you this information based on the nature and extent of the skin condition you are treating. If you are uncertain or instructions have somehow been missed, call the office and speak to the experts. It is important to precisely follow the directions, because each medication and each skin problem requires a tailored approach.

Should I apply the medication only until the area of concern is healed?

Here, too, your veterinarian is the best judge. Some lesions or infections may appear healed when in actuality, healing is

incomplete. Some types of infections take much longer to heal than others. Very likely, you will be asked to bring your pet back to the vet for a recheck, and how long the treatment should be continued will be decided at that visit. If you have any question about whether the healing is proceeding too slowly or whether it is complete, contact your veterinarian's office.

Can I catch what my pet has?

Yes, in some cases this is possible. Some fungal and bacterial infections can be contagious to you and your family. This is why it is imperative to wear gloves when cleaning the affected area and to discard all items that were used. If you or anyone in your family develops skin lesions, be sure to mention to your physician that you have a pet with a disorder requiring you to apply medication to the pet's skin. Bring the pet's diagnosis (the medical name of your pet's problem) with you to your physician to avoid misinterpretation or overreaction.

Are there any restrictions for my pet?

Your pet should not have a bath or play in water until the area of concern has healed. Your veterinarian should recheck your pet's condition and advise you when your pet can have a bath.

OTHER RELATED INFORMATION SHEET

- [How to Assemble and Use an Elizabethan Collar](#)

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