

Topical Medications

● SKILL SNAPSHOT

Purpose

- Applies medication to skin or mucous membrane for local effect or limited systemic absorption.

When to use

- Ordered creams, ointments, lotions, gels, powders, shampoos, foams, or other topical formulations.

Supplies needed

- MAR/order; medication; gloves; applicator/gauze; cleansing supplies; measuring guide; dressing if ordered.

● PREP + PATIENT SETUP

- Verify rights, allergies, site, dose/amount, frequency, prior application, and whether occlusion is ordered.
- Assess skin integrity, lesion size, drainage, pain, infection, and treatment response.

● VAULT TIP

- Topical does not mean harmless—the amount, exact site, gloves, and whether it is covered all change absorption.

● STEP-BY-STEP

1. Hand hygiene; identify patient; compare medication with MAR/order.
2. Position and expose only the treatment area. Apply gloves to prevent absorption and cross-contamination.
3. Remove old medication/dressing as ordered. Note amount, drainage, and skin response; discard safely.
4. Cleanse area from least contaminated to most contaminated using ordered solution; pat completely dry.
5. Inspect and measure affected skin as needed. Do not apply to open/broken skin unless specifically ordered for that use.
6. Use a clean applicator or gloved finger. Avoid touching container tip to patient.
7. Apply the prescribed amount in a thin, even layer following hair direction unless product instructions differ.
8. For measured ointment, use dose paper/ruler as ordered. Do not rub products that should remain on surface.
9. Avoid eyes, mouth, mucosa, and unaffected skin unless these are the prescribed sites.
10. Apply dressing or occlusion only when ordered; occlusion can greatly increase absorption.
11. Remove gloves without touching treated area, perform hand hygiene, and prevent transfer to clothing, linens, or others.
12. Reassess pain, redness, burning, rash, local response, and systemic effects. Teach handwashing, dose timing, and safe storage.

● SAFETY REMINDERS

- Wear gloves; some topical drugs absorb through caregiver skin.
- Do not use heat or occlusion unless ordered.
- Avoid applying multiple products to same site without compatibility guidance.
- Potent steroids and hazardous drugs require extra precautions.

● COMMON MISTAKES

- Applying over old medication.
- Using too much product.
- Contaminating container tip.
- Covering with an unapproved occlusive dressing.

● DOCUMENTATION

- Medication, amount, site, time.
- Skin findings before/after.
- Old product removed and dressing used.
- Tolerance/adverse effects.
- Teaching and notifications.