

Conditions in children



Skin Care in Babies and Young Children

Important Points

- Washing in warm water is all that is necessary
- Antibacterial and perfumed soaps are unnecessary
- A small amount of moisturiser such as sorbolene or aqueous cream is good for baby's skin
- In the cold weather the skin can become drier and a moisturiser can be used two or three times a day
- In sunny weather use clothing, hats, sunshades on prams and shade to protect baby from the sun
- Infants and very young babies absorb more chemicals through their skin than adults
- Keep to a minimum the number of products that are put on a young baby's skin
- Change nappies frequently
- Use nappies that are made of good quality absorbent material
- The nappy area can be washed with warm water using a little soap, sorbolene or aqueous cream

What is special about the skin of newborn and young children?

After birth a baby's skin takes a little while to get used to the new world. There are many things in the environment to which the newborn skin may be more sensitive than in later life. However, a few simple measures in the home are all that is necessary to ensure that a young baby's skin is able to cope with the environment.

Washing the baby's skin

Washing your baby's skin with warm water is all that is necessary most of the time. Soap may dry out the skin.

A small amount of unperfumed bath oil added to the bath will help to keep the skin soft.

Avoid bubble baths as they remove natural oils from the skin. Antibacterial or perfumed soaps are unnecessary and should also be avoided. It is important

to carefully pat dry the skin folds including the armpits, groin, neck and behind the ears after bathing.

A small amount of moisturiser such as sorbolene or aqueous cream can be used to clean the nappy area. They can also be used as moisturisers after bathing. If your baby has dry skin, or infantile eczema, it is important to avoid soap completely and use the moisturisers in the bath as well as applying them to the skin regularly.

In winter, wash your child's skin less often as the cold weather makes the skin drier. If the skin is usually dry it may require moisturiser applied several times a day, especially after bathing.

How does my baby's skin cope with different temperatures?

The skin helps control the body's temperature. In very young children, the temperature control is less able to cope with extremes of heat or cold. In the warm weather, light, loose fitting clothing made of cotton or cotton/synthetic mix is best. Try to avoid doonas, particularly in hot weather, as they may make the child overheat.

In the cold weather, cotton or cotton/synthetic mixed clothes can be used. Woollen clothing over the top of cotton clothing is okay, but should not be in direct contact with the skin as it may make it itchy. The hands and feet in very young babies may look very blue and mottled in the cold. It is not a major problem but covering up the feet and hands in the cold will prevent it happening.

Freckles are not normally present at birth. They are an increase in the colour produced by pigment cells (melanocytes). They occur in early childhood with exposure to moderate to large amounts of sunlight on the areas most exposed, e.g., the cheeks, the back of the hands or back of the forearms. Freckles may be able to be prevented by good sun protection. In sunny weather, light clothing, hats, sunshades on prams and shade when outdoors is the best protection against UV. When necessary, a small amount of broad spectrum sunscreen of SPF 15 or more can be applied to the small areas of the face, back of the hands or feet that are not protected by clothing. For very young children, a light lotion is better than a heavier cream. If the child's skin is very dry, then a cream may be more satisfactory than a lotion.

What about the nappy area?

Change nappies frequently. Avoid plastic overpants if nappies cannot be changed frequently. Use nappies that contain good quality absorbent material. It is not necessary to add any chemicals to the final rinse of the washing machine cycle.

Infants and very young babies absorb more chemicals through their skin so keep to a minimum the number of products that are used on the skin.

Aqueous or sorbolene creams can be used for cleaning the nappy area. Otherwise the nappy area can be washed with warm water.

What about hair and nails?

Some babies are born with quite a lot of hair. This may be shed in the first few months before new soft, fine hair starts to grow again. The soft hair of infants is different to adult hair, which is stronger, longer and wider.

Some babies are born with only a very small amount of hair which gradually develops its normal growth pattern and shedding over the first year or two. For infants and young babies, hair cutting is not necessary. Babies lying on their back and moving about may cause patches of hair thinning where the scalp is rubbing on the bedclothes. Most very young babies' hair does not require any shampooing. If shampoo is going to be used, a very mild shampoo is best, using as little and as infrequently as possible. Cradle cap is very common and most children grow out of it. It can be removed by massaging olive oil or moisturiser into the scalp. Wash the hair over a basin before the bath otherwise the baby will be sitting in a bath containing shampoo, which may dry out its skin.

The hair colour in babies is quite variable. Some are born with dark hair that is replaced with light hair as the new hair grows. The opposite is less common. Red hair in the scalp may not become apparent until hairs start to enter the normal growth pattern at around six to nine months of age. Even as the baby gets older, hair colour may change, with blond children commonly darkening around the age of eight years.

The nails in newborn babies are often very soft and may not require cutting for the first few months. Even then it is gentler to peel the growing edge of the nail as needed. The nails can be quite flattened or spoon shaped in the newborn. This is normal and they tend to change to the normal curved shape of the nail in childhood by the age of three to four years.

Occasionally the skin on which the nail sits may not have flattened sufficiently as the nail first develops. The nail can then push into the skin and produce swelling or redness on the tip of the finger or toe. This will go down over time with no treatment necessary as the nail grows through.

Further Information

Your Maternal and Child Health nurse.

Your pharmacist.

Your family doctor.

A dermatologist.