

## Making Sense of all those Steroid Creams

Yesterday a potential member was asking what discount I could get on her current medications. This is a big attraction of direct primary care -- I can get generic meds for my patients at their wholesale cost without markup.

That's right, I buy them wholesale, just like Walgreens or CVS does, but there is no pharmacy or insurance company markup, so patients save big.

So I wanted to find out how much a generic steroid would cost her -- one exactly equivalent to the strength of the one she was using.

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Here's how I did it -- and how you can, too. Before showing you this secret, there are four things you need to know about topical steroids.

1) First, although there are dozens of topical steroids -- with dozens more combinations of strengths and formulations -- they all belong to one of just seven categories. So despite all the confusion people have when looking at the names and numbers on the tube, just remember that every steroid belongs to one of just seven strengths.

2) The second thing to understand is that there's a big difference in strength among topical steroids. Those in Class I are about 600 - 1,000 times stronger than those in Class VII.

3) Third, it's also important to know that whatever percentage you see on a topical steroid's label is not referring to its strength; it only indicates the concentration of the drug that is contained in that formulation.

You simply can't compare the percentages of any two steroids. For instance, a 0.03 percent Class I steroid is much more potent than a 3 percent Class VII steroid. Always, always use the category number to compare the strengths of steroids.

4) And finally, these 7 categories can be called 'classes' or 'groups,' depending on which part of the world you're in. Some countries use Roman numerals (I – VII) while others use the Arabic numerals we are accustomed to (1-7). And different organizations have different word descriptions for these 7 categories of potency, depending on what organization is defining these 7 categories.

But don't worry. All you need to remember is that the seven different groups of steroids are ranked from highest to lowest potency.

Then you can compare one steroid to another and know with certainty that whichever one is higher on the list (the one that has a lower potency classification number) -- is the stronger one.

Still confused?

You don't have to be. Look below to see a chart (or [click here for an enlarged view](#)) I made that demonstrates how 4 different organizations use different terms to describe the same 7 categories. And always remember, whether it's class or group, Roman numerals or the Arabic ones you easily recognize,

or it's called highest, ultra-high, or superpotent, all these terms refer to the same 7 strengths of topical steroids.

	1) US Food & Drug Administration (FDA) Classes I – VII (United States)	2) World Health Organization (WHO) 4 Groups (Most countries, incl. UK, DE & NZ )	3) National Psoriasis and 4) National Eczema Foundations Classes 1 - 7
Class I or Group 1	Highest Potency	Ultra-high Potency	Superpotent
Class II or Group 2	High Potency	High Potency	Potent
Class III or Group 3	High/Medium Potency		Upper Mid-Strength
Class IV or Group 4	Medium Potency	Moderate Potency	Mid-Strength
Class V or Group 5	Medium/Low Potency		Lower Mid-Strength
Class VI or Group 6	Low Potency	Low Potency	Mild
Class VII or Group 7	Lowest Potency		Least Potent
<u>Information Source</u>	<a href="#">VeryWell Health</a>	<a href="#">World Health Organization</a>	<a href="#">National Psoriasis Foundation</a> <a href="#">National Eczema Foundation</a>

Once you have looked at the chart above to make sure it makes sense to you, then you're ready to master the list of topical steroids.

Is your steroid a brand name one that is super expensive?

Below is a list (or click her) from the American Academy of Family Physicians that organizes the most commonly-used topical steroids by degree of potency, as just explained.

So find the steroid you use and see what [other topical steroids will work equally well](#) – maybe even one sold over the counter!

And if you still have questions, or you want to know how you can start getting your meds at wholesale cost, call me at 314-680-1632

Potency Ratings of Topical Corticosteroids				
Medication				
Potency (group)	Generic	Brand	Dosage vehicle	Available sizes
Ultra high (I)	Augmented betamethasone dipropionate 0.05%	Diprolene*	G,† O	15, 45, 50 g
	Clobetasol propionate 0.05%	Clobex	L, Sh	59, 118 mL (L); 118 mL (Sh)
		Olux*	F	50, 100 g
		Temovate*	C, G, O	15, 30, 45 g (C, O); 15, 30, 60 g (G)
		Temovate E*	C	15, 30, 60 g
	Difforaseone diacetate 0.05%	Apexicon*	O	15, 30, 60 g
	Fluocinonide 0.1%	Vanos	C	30, 60 g
	Flurandrenolide 4 mcg per m <sup>2</sup>	Cordran	T	24" × 3" and 80" × 3" rolls
	Halobetasol propionate 0.05%	Ultravate*	C, O	15, 50 g
	Amcinonide 0.1%	—	O	15, 30, 60 g
High (II)	Augmented betamethasone dipropionate 0.05%	Diprolene*	L	30, 60 mL
		Diprolene AF*	C	15, 50 g
	Betamethasone dipropionate 0.05%	Diprosone*‡	O	15, 45 g
	Desoximetasone	Topicort 0.25%*	C, O	15, 60 g
		Topicort 0.05%*	G	15, 60 g
	Difforaseone diacetate 0.05%	Apexicon E*	C	15, 30, 60 g
	Fluocinonide 0.05%	Lidex*	C,† G,† O	15, 30, 60 g
	Halcinonide 0.1%	Halog	C, O, So	15, 30, 60, 240 g (C, O); 30, 60 mL (So)
	Amcinonide 0.1%	Cyclocort‡	C	4, 15, 30, 60 g
	Betamethasone dipropionate 0.05%	Betanate*	C	15, 45 g
Medium to high (III)	Fluticasone propionate 0.005%	Cutivate*	O	15, 30, 60 g
	Triamcinolone acetonide 0.5%	Cinalog*‡	C, O	15 g
Medium (IV and V)	Betamethasone valerate	Beta-Val 0.1%*	C, L	14, 45 g (C); 60 mL (L)
		Luxiq 0.12%	F	100 g
	Desoximetasone 0.05%	Topicort LP*	C	15, 60 g
	Fluocinolone acetonide 0.025%	Synalar*†	C, O	15, 60 g
	Fluticasone propionate 0.05%	Cutivate*	C	15, 30, 60 g
	Hydrocortisone butyrate 0.1%	Locoid*	O	5, 10, 15, 30, 45 g
	Hydrocortisone probutate 0.1%	Pandel	C	15, 45, 60 g
	Hydrocortisone valerate 0.2%	Westcort*	C, O	14, 45, 60 g (C, O); 120 g (C)
	Mometasone furoate 0.1%	Elocon*	C, L, O	15, 45 g (C, O); 30, 60 mL (L)
	Triamcinolone acetonide 0.025%	Kenalog*‡	C, L, O	15, 60, 454 g (C, O); 60 mL (L)
Low (VI)	Triamcinolone acetonide 0.1%	Triderm*	C, L,† O†	15, 60, 454 g (C, O); 15, 60 mL (L)
	Aldometasone dipropionate 0.05%	Aclovate*	C, O	15, 45, 60 g
	Desonide 0.05%	Desonate	G	15, 30, 60 g
		Desowen*	C, O	15, 60 g
		Lokara	L	60, 120 mL
		Verdeso	F	100 g
	Fluocinolone 0.01%	—	C	15, 60 g
	Hydrocortisone butyrate 0.1%	Locoid*	C	5, 10, 15, 30, 45 g
	Hydrocortisone 1%, 2.5%	—	C, L, O	20, 30, 120 g (C, O); 60, 120 mL (L)

C = cream; F = foam; G = gel; L = lotion; O = ointment; Sh = shampoo; So = solution; T = tape.

\*—Generic is available.

†—Brand not available in this formulation.

‡—Brand no longer available in the United States.

Information from reference 24.

Notes from Heather Brannon, MD | [‘Topical Steroid Strengths’ posted on Verywell Health](#), updated 1/6/18

**Formulations:** Topical steroids come in different forms. These formulations differ in potency, usually based on how much of the the active medication is in contact with your skin and for how long. So the more water it contains, the easier it is to apply. But the more water it contains, the more dilute the medicine also is when in contact with your skin and the more easily sweat and moisture wash it off. I bring this up because the same medication can be placed in different categories based on its formulation, so be sure to compare formulation when you are looking for steroid that’s equivalent to the one you’re using.

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Formulations commonly seen are:

- Ointments are made of oils and little to no water and don't usually contain a preservative. They're great for dry, scaly skin or areas with thick skin like the soles of your feet and the palms of your hands, and are the strongest form of topical steroids.
- Creams, the form that's prescribed most often, are a mixture of water and oils and usually contains a preservative. They're especially good for hairy and wet areas and are easily applied without a greasy feel.
- Gels are made with water and propylene glycol and, like creams, they're easy to apply.
- Solutions, foams, and lotions usually contain oil, water, and other chemicals and are used on your scalp.

### **How Topical Steroids Help**

Topical steroids help by reducing inflammation in your skin. For example, if you have eczema and you experience a flare-up, you can apply a cream that decreases your skin irritation and makes your skin feel less itchy. This treatment helps you stop scratching the area and allows your skin to heal.

### **Why Potency Matters**

The appropriate strength for each person and situation depends on many factors. For example, babies absorb topical steroids faster than adults, so they may require a low-potency steroid. Areas of the body where your skin touches other skin (think armpits or groin), as well as sensitive areas like the skin on your eyelids, tend to absorb topical steroids more rapidly, so those regions of the body also usually require a low-potency steroid. However, thick, rough skin on the palms of your hands and the soles of your feet usually absorb topical steroids more slowly than other parts of the body, so those areas typically require a more potent steroid.

### **One more thing to keep in mind**

The greater the potency of the steroid --in other words, the lower its class number -- the more likely it is to cause side effects.