

Last update: March 31, 2026

Pharmacotherapy for psoriasis: Topical corticosteroids¹⁻²⁷

Considerations:

- TCS are very effective at managing redness and itching. They are somewhat effective for managing thickness/infiltration and scaling.
- Rapid effect makes them ideal for **induction**, especially with very high- or high potency (Class 1-3). Greater potency yields greater effect.
- Possibility of tachyphylaxis and possible rebound effect with abrupt discontinuation.
- Flares:** Use once or twice daily until clear (usually 2-4 weeks).
- Maintenance/Taper:** Decrease frequency (e.g., alternate day then twice weekly) or alternate with non-steroid agents to maintain remission.
- Administration:** Apply topical corticosteroids to cover affected areas. Higher potencies may be required for thicker plaques.
- Onset to improvement:** 1-2 weeks depending on body area involvement and TCS potency.

Medication	Strength	Formulation	Scalp	Face and intertriginous areas	Trunk and arms/legs	Palms and soles	Nails	Cost (1 month)	Coverage (ODB/NHIB)
Very high potency (Class 1) (Max: 50 g/week; options for scalp, trunk, arms/legs, palms, soles, nails)									
Betamethasone dipropionate (Diprolene®, Topilene®) <i>Propylene glycol formulation ↑ penetration and effectiveness but may cause contact dermatitis.</i>	0.05%	Ointment	X	X	✓	✓	✓	\$22-56	✓
		Cream	X	X	✓	✓	✓		
		Lotion	✓	X	✓	X	X		
Clobetasol propionate (Clobex®, Dermovate®)	0.05%	Ointment	X	X	✓	✓	✓	\$22-32	✓
		Cream	✓	X	✓	✓	✓		
		Scalp application	✓	X	X	X	X	\$30-46	X
		Shampoo	✓	X	X	X	X	\$58-102 *\$156/bottle	
		Spray	✓	X	X	X	X	\$92-172 *\$138/bottle	
Halobetasol propionate (Bryhali®, Ultravate®)	0.05%	Ointment	X	X	✓	✓	✓	\$32-50	✓
		Cream	✓	X	✓	✓	✓		
	0.01%	Lotion	✓	X	✓	X	X	\$56-98	ODB: ✓ NIHB: X
High potency (Class 2 and 3) (Max: 100 g/week; options for scalp, trunk, arms/legs, palms, soles, nails)									
Amcinonide (Cyclocort®)	0.1%	Cream	✓	X	✓	✓	✓	\$32-50	✓
Betamethasone dipropionate (Diprosone®)	0.05%	Ointment	X	X	✓	✓	✓	\$21-31	✓
		Cream	✓	X	✓	✓	✓		
		Lotion	✓	X	✓	X	X		
Desoximetasone (Topicort®)	0.25%	Ointment	X	X	✓	✓	✓	\$50-88	X
		Cream	✓	X	✓	✓	✓		
	0.05%	Gel	✓	X	✓	✓	✓	\$43-72	
Fluocinonide (Lidex®, Lyderm®)	0.05%	Ointment	X	X	✓	✓	✓	\$27-41	✓
		Cream	✓	X	✓	✓	✓	\$24-34	
		Gel	✓	X	✓	✓	✓	\$27-42	

Medication	Strength	Formulation	Scalp	Face and intertriginous areas	Trunk and arms/legs	Palms and soles	Nails	Cost (1 month)	Coverage (ODB/NHIB)
Medium potency (Class 4 and 5) (Options for scalp, trunk, arms/legs)									
Beclomethasone dipropionate (Propaderm®)	0.025%	Cream	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	\$39-65	✓
Betamethasone valerate (Betaderm®, Ectosone®)	0.05%	Ointment	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	\$15-20	✓
	0.1%								
	0.05%	Cream	✓	✗	✓	✗	\$18-32		
	0.1%								
	0.05%								
0.1%	Lotion	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗			
0.1%	Scalp lotion	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗			
Clobetasone butyrate (Spectro EczemaCare®) <i>Available without a prescription</i>	0.05%	Cream	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	\$30-46	ODB: ✗ NIHB: ✓
Desoximetasone (Topicort Mild®)	0.05%	Cream	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	\$38-63	✓
Hydrocortisone valerate (HydroVal®)	0.2%	Ointment	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	\$20-27	✓
		Cream	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗		
Mometasone furoate (Elocom®)	0.1%	Ointment	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	\$22-32	✓
		Cream	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	\$36-59	
		Lotion	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	\$28-43	
Prednicarbate (emollient base) (Dermatop®)	0.1%	Cream	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	\$111-208	✗
Triamcinolone acetonide (Aristocort R®, Aristocort C®, Triaderm®, Oracort®)	0.1%	Ointment	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	\$21-29	✓
	0.1%	Cream	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	\$21-29	ODB: ✗ NIHB: ✓
	0.5%								
	0.1%	Oral paste	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	N/A	✓

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Medication	Strength	Formulation	Scalp	Face and intertriginous areas	Trunk and arms/legs	Palms and soles	Nails	Cost (1 month)	Coverage (ODB/NHIB)
Low potency (Class 6 and 7) (Options for scalp, trunk, arms/legs, face, intertriginous areas)									
Desonide	0.05%	Ointment	✓	✓	X	X	X	\$25-38	✓
		Cream	✓	✓	X	X	X		
Fluocinolone acetonide (Derma-Smooth/FS®, DermOtic Oil®)	0.01%	Body oil	X	✓	X	X	X	\$26-39	ODB: X NIHB: ✓
		Scalp oil	✓	X	X	X	X		
		Ear drops	X	X	X	X	X	N/A	
Hydrocortisone (Hyderm®, Cortoderm®) <i>Available without a prescription</i>	0.5%	Ointment	✓	✓	X	X	X	\$19-27	✓
	1%		✓	✓	X	X	X		
	0.5%	Cream	✓	✓	X	X	X	\$19-21	ODB: X NIHB: ✓
	1%		✓	✓	X	X	X		✓

Legend:

NIHB = Non-Insured Health Benefits; **ODB** = Ontario Drug Benefit; **TCS** = topical corticosteroid

Area specific application above denoted by '✓' and 'X' are recommendations based on potency, formulation vehicle and expert opinion. However, the potency and formulation may have additional use cases not captured in the table. Clinical judgment is still warranted in selection.

Pregnancy: Safe during pregnancy (cumulative doses < 60 g/week). There have been reports of low fetal birth weight with prolonged potent topical corticosteroid use during pregnancy.

Breastfeeding: Safe as long as away from the nipple and areola.

Cost: Several assumptions were made to derive a cost estimate. An approximation to cover a BSA of 5% (~1.25 grams per application) for a 1-month supply, using the once-daily and twice-daily doses (including a 10% markup and a \$12.99 dispensing fee).

Side effects:

Topical: Burning, stinging, itching, irritation, dryness, folliculitis, hypertrichosis, acneiform eruptions, hypopigmentation, allergic contact dermatitis, maceration, secondary infection, skin atrophy, striae, miliaria, erythema, telangiectasia, bruising, pigment changes, lichenified dermatitis, pustulation

Systemic (can occur when used over large surface area, with prolonged use, or if combined with occlusive dressings): HPA axis suppression, adrenal insufficiency (weakness, weight loss, hypotension, and gastrointestinal distress), Cushing's syndrome, hyperglycemia, glucosuria, hypertension, immunosuppression/infection risk (rare), visual symptoms, upper respiratory tract infection, gastroenteritis (rare)

Not an exhaustive list, consult the monograph for additional considerations.

Contraindications: Hypersensitivity to corticosteroids or other ingredients in the formulation, viral skin disease (e.g., herpes simplex, varicella) or untreated infections of the skin

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