Dry skin – An impaired skin barrier
An impaired skin barrier has a shortage of natural oils which allows moisture to escape from the skin too quickly. The skin cells shrink, opening cracks which allow greater moisture loss and the entry of irritants.

The skin will become dry and may be itchy. Scratching damages the skin even more. People with dry skin conditions, such as eczema and psoriasis, have an impaired skin barrier.

Dry skin can affect people of any ethnic origin and any age group from the very young to the elderly. Older people are prone to developing dry skin, as the skin becomes thinner and less efficient at producing natural oils.

Normal skin
Healthy skin provides a barrier between the body and the external environment.

In normal skin, natural oils fill spaces between plump skin cells to form a good skin barrier – keeping moisture in and irritants out.

Skin cells and the surrounding natural oils are often shown as a brick wall. The skin cells are the ‘bricks’ and the natural oils are the ‘mortar’.

Restoring the skin barrier using a moisturiser/emollient
Emollients rehydrate the skin by forming a layer of oil which traps moisture in the skin allowing cells to swell and close the cracks.

Some emollients also contain humectants, such as glycerol or urea, which keep water within the skin.

As dry skins are thirsty skins emollients should be applied regularly in large amounts to rehydrate and soften the skin, making it smooth, supple and less itchy and maintain the improvement in the skin.

Emollients are available as lotions, creams, ointments, gels, soap substitutes and bath emollients. Different types of emollients may be needed for specific areas of the body.
**DO’S AND DON’TS OF GOOD SKIN CARE**

- **DO** use moisturisers/emollients generously and regularly, to improve the condition of the skin and to help reduce itching.
- **DON’T** scratch itchy skin if you can avoid it, as this causes further skin damage.
- **DO** try to find suitable emollients for your skin with your nurse’s or doctor’s help. This may be a combination of cream, ointment, lotion or gel emollients, depending on how dry your skin is and which you prefer to use.
- **DON’T** vigorously rub the emollients into your skin.
- **DO** smooth the emollient gently onto dry skin. Use gentle strokes in the same direction as hair growth (like stroking a cat or dog). This avoids blockage of the hair follicles.
- **DO** allow time for any excess emollient to soak in, if necessary.
- **DO** apply emollients, immediately after a bath or shower, as this helps to trap moisture in the skin. Pat the skin dry before applying the emollient.

**HOW TO GET THE BEST RESULTS FROM YOUR MOISTURISER/EMOLLIENT**

Moisturisers/emollients are safe and easy to use and can be used as often as you like – the more the better!

Apply sufficient so that the skin looks ‘shiny’ ideally 3 to 4 times a day, or as often as required.

Exposed areas such as the face, neck and hands may need more frequent treatment.

**HOW SHOULD EMOLLIENTS BE USED?**

- Applied directly to skin
- Used instead of soap
- Used in the bath water
- Used under the shower

Although all emollients rehydrate the skin, some are designed for specific uses as shown above. Therefore it is important that you always read the label on your emollient(s).