

Parents' guide to children's skincare (birth to puberty)

Who is this leaflet for?

This leaflet gives general skin care advice for children from birth to puberty who do not have a diagnosed skin condition. If your child is currently receiving, or has previously received, medical advice or treatment for their skin, please follow the skin care advice given to you by your healthcare professional, as this may be different from the general advice below.

The rise of social media has changed the landscape of skin care. Online videos and trends from influencers and celebrities can make it seem as though children need multiple products and complicated routines. However, much of this content is not based on scientific evidence, is commercially driven, and is not designed for young skin. Children's skin can be more vulnerable to irritation and damage, particularly in early life, and ultraviolet (UV) damage in childhood can affect skin health later on. 'Skin care' is not always harmless "self-care": the wrong products, or too many products, can damage the skin barrier, cause skin irritation or contact skin allergy (which is lifelong), worsen acne, increase sensitivity to sunlight, and potentially affect future skin health.

Children's skin needs change significantly with age, so skin care advice should change too. This leaflet covers children up to the age of puberty. Puberty starts at different ages, but once acne, body odour, shaving, makeup or stronger products become relevant, a separate teenage skincare guide is usually more helpful. In most cases, children do not need complicated skin care routines. A simple routine is usually enough.

Key points

- Children's skin can be more vulnerable to irritation and damage.
- Most children need only very simple skin care and good sun protection.
- Skin care products are not always harmless, especially if they are designed for adult skin.
- Shade, clothing and hats are important parts of sun protection at every age.

Skin care by age

Newborn to 6 months

In very young babies, skin care should be kept extremely simple. There is no rush to give a first bath: where possible, the first full bath should be delayed for at least 24 hours after birth. Vernix caseosa is the waxy, protective coating newborns are born with. It provides antimicrobial, moisturising, and temperature-regulating benefits, so

it's best to delaying bathing for at least one or two days. After this, most babies need only gentle washing of the face, neck, hands and nappy area on most days, with a full bath two or three times a week. As your baby gets older, a bath can become part of a calming bedtime or bonding routine, but daily bathing is not essential and bathing more than once a day should be avoided. Do not use bubble baths, soaps or fragranced products, as these can dry and irritate delicate infant skin. Water alone is often enough, or a gentle, unfragranced, pH-balanced cleanser can be used for more stubborn soiling. If the skin is dry, use a fragrance-free emollient (medical word for moisturiser designed to help support the skin's barrier) recommended by your pharmacist or healthcare professional. Avoid using oils unless you have been specifically advised to do so.

Skin problems are common in the nappy area in infants – mostly this can be managed by reducing time in soiled nappies and using a fragrance-free emollient on damp cotton bud to clean at nappy change. Avoid wipes as these are a common cause of irritation and can cause allergy. An ointment barrier cream can be applied to protect skin after cleansing. Do seek advice if not settling or any concerns.

Sun protection is especially important in this age group. Babies under 6 months should be kept out of direct strong sunlight as much as possible. Shade, protective clothing and wide-brimmed hats are the best forms of protection. Sunscreen is not usually recommended as the main form of sun protection in this age group, although if a small area of skin cannot be covered, a small amount of a high-SPF, broad-spectrum sunscreen suitable for sensitive skin can be used. Pure mineral sunscreens, containing zinc oxide and/or titanium dioxide, are preferred if sunscreen is needed.

6 months to 3 years

At this age, skin care should continue to focus on protecting the skin barrier. Most babies and toddlers need only gentle washing, minimal products, and sensible sun protection.

- Use lukewarm water and a gentle, unperfumed cleanser only when needed.
- If the skin is dry, use a plain moisturiser or emollient.
- Avoid fragranced products, essential oils, bubble baths and heavily foaming washes, especially if your child has sensitive skin.
- The most important sun protection is still shade, protective clothing, hats and avoiding the hottest parts of the day.
- Use a broad-spectrum sunscreen with SPF 30 or higher on exposed skin, and reapply every two hours and after swimming or water play.
- Choose sunscreens that are labelled “For Kids” or “from 6months” as they have been formulated to be suitable for the delicate skin in this age group. Do

not make your own sunscreen or buy “homemade” sunscreens as they will not have undergone the rigorous testing required to ensure the sunscreen is actually effective. Chemical and mineral sunscreens are both safe to use on children. Chemical sunscreen is less likely to leave a chalky looking residue (white cast) especially notable in children with skin of colour.

- Mineral sunscreens, containing zinc oxide or titanium dioxide, may be preferred for young children and those with sensitive skin because they tend to be less irritating. However, in the UK they can be more expensive and harder to find, so if a mineral option is not available, a standard children’s broad-spectrum sunscreen is appropriate provided it does not sting or irritate your child’s skin.
- If a product causes redness, stinging or rash, stop using it, try a different brand (ideally a simpler, fragrance-free one), and seek advice from a pharmacist or healthcare professional.

3 years to early puberty

Most children in this age group still need only a simple routine. As children get older, they may start to show more interest in skin care, so it is helpful for parents to guide the choices being made and to know what products are being used. For the majority, all that is needed is gentle washing, moisturising if needed, and sun protection.

- A separate facial routine is usually unnecessary.
- Choose gentle, fragrance-free products where possible.
- Avoid products marketed for anti-ageing, “glow”, resurfacing or exfoliation.
- Use broad-spectrum SPF 30 or higher for outdoor activities, together with shade, hats and suitable clothing.
- From April to October in the UK, the UV index is often high enough to damage the skin. If your child is outdoors in direct sunlight during these months, appropriate sun protection should be followed. This includes wearing a hat, staying in the shade during outdoor playtime and being aware that peak UV times are between 11am and 2pm, this is when skin can burn unexpectedly.
- No sunscreen provides complete protection, so sunscreen should always be used alongside other sun-protective measures.

Older children and early puberty

From this stage onwards, children may start to show early signs of puberty, and skin changes can be among the first noticeable changes. Hormonal changes increase oil (sebum) production in the skin, so hair may become oilier and spots or blackheads may begin to appear, particularly on the forehead and nose. While these early changes can often be managed with simple skin care, it is important to remember

that acne is a medical condition. If your child is developing more significant spots on the face, chest or back, or if the acne is painful, scarring or affecting confidence, seek advice from a pharmacist, GP or dermatologist.

Children in this age group also become more aware of their appearance, skin care trends, peer pressure and online beauty culture. It is reasonable to allow older children some say in the products they use, while making sure those products are suitable for their skin and not unnecessarily harsh.

- For facial skin care, this can be very simple ie flannel and water but can use simple products such as a gentle cleanser (one that does not contain scrubs or beads), a basic moisturiser if needed, and SPF 30 or higher sunscreen when in direct sunlight between April and October.
- If getting more greasy skin and spots then choose non-comedogenic products and avoid harsh scrubs or picking spots.
- Salicylic acid can be helpful as an over-the-counter treatment for blackheads and mild acne. It is available in washes, leave-on products and spot patches or stickers. Start slowly and increase use only if the skin tolerates it well.
- Benzoyl peroxide 5% can also be used for acne. Ask a pharmacist for advice and introduce it slowly. For sensitive skin, a wash with a short contact time may be better tolerated than a leave-on gel. Start once or twice a week and build up gradually if tolerated. Apply moisturiser afterwards if needed. Benzoyl peroxide can bleach clothes, bedding and towels, but it does not bleach the skin.
- Over-the-counter retinoids, alpha hydroxy acids (AHAs) such as glycolic or lactic acid, vitamin C products, lightening creams and physical exfoliants should be avoided unless advised by a healthcare professional.
- Expensive or on trend/ viral products are not necessarily better and may irritate the skin or create unrealistic expectations.
- Learn with your child. Be curious about the ingredients in a product and what they hope it will achieve. This can help open a conversation about confidence, fitting in, acne, or worries about appearance.
- Body hair particularly pubic, armpit, arm and leg may become more apparent. Ensure your child is aware this is expected and not something to feel embarrassed by.

Moving into the teenage years

As your child moves into their teenage years, they may become more interested in skincare, nails, hair dye and social media trends. A separate leaflet written for teenagers covers these topics in more detail, including safe experimentation, acne,

sun protection, social media pressure and body image. Reading it together may help you support safe choices and open conversations about confidence, appearance and skin health.

School and nursery

If your child is likely to be outdoors, sunscreen should be applied before nursery or school. Whether children can reapply sunscreen during the day will depend on their age, the setting, and the school or nursery's policy. Hats, shade and protective clothing remain important because sunscreen works best as one part of a wider sun protection routine.

When to seek medical advice

Speak to a pharmacist, GP or dermatologist if:

- Your child's skin is persistently dry, sore, itchy or inflamed;
- Your child develops painful, widespread or scarring acne;
- Simple skin care is not helping
- Your child is demonstrating concern about appearance which is affecting wellbeing. This may include spending excessive time on 'skin care' routines