

When and How to Use Calamine Lotion for Itchy Skin, According to Dermatologists

The anti-itch cream is a game-changer for bug bites, rashes, and more.



By Korin Miller Jul 10, 2021

Calamine lotion has been *the* go-to solution for inflamed and itchy skin for decades. Your grandparents used it, your parents reach for it, and you probably have a bottle of it tucked away somewhere.

But for all of its fame, most people still get confused about how calamine lotion works or when to use it. As we continue through summer—a.k.a. prime calamine lotion season thanks to irritating bug bites—learn exactly how the anti-itch cream works and the skin issues it helps soothe.

What is calamine lotion, exactly?

Calamine lotion is a topical ointment that's designed to help relieve itchy skin. The lotion is usually geared toward treating rashes caused by poison ivy, poison oak, and poison sumac, but it has more uses than that.

“Calamine lotion has been around for hundreds of years and is known for its thick, soothing consistency and pink color,” says board-certified dermatologist Ife J. Rodney, M.D., founding director of Eternal Dermatology and Aesthetics in Maryland.

Calamine lotion contains a mixture of predominantly zinc and iron salts, says Joshua Zeichner, M.D., director of cosmetic and clinical research at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai in New York City. The main ingredients are zinc oxide and iron oxide, but every brand of calamine lotion is a little different—some can also contain ingredients like calcium hydroxide, carrageenan, glycerin, and water.

How does calamine lotion work?



Calamine lotion is a powerhouse product. It can help reduce the need to scratch, prevent infection, dry out oils, and clean your skin, Dr. Zeichner says. “It has been used for centuries for its anti-itch, astringent, and antiseptic properties,” he says.

One of the lotion’s main ingredients—topical zinc oxide—is a popular ingredient used for wound healing, Dr. Rodney explains. “It helps regenerate cells and slows down the degradation of collagen,” proteins that keep skin strong, she says. “It also has anti-inflammatory properties.” Meanwhile, iron oxide (which is responsible for that signature pink color) also helps with skin protection and healing, she says.

“This zinc oxide is soothing, and the iron oxide is what makes it drying,” New York City board-certified dermatologist Doris Day, M.D.. While she promotes its drying properties, she prefers using hydrocortisone cream for itchiness, instead.

When should you use calamine lotion?

Overall, Dr. Zeichner says that calamine lotion “can be used for almost any type of itchy rash and is very low risk.” If you want to get specific, though, Dr. Rodney says **you can use calamine lotion to treat a range of different of skin issues:**

Shingles

Calamine lotion helps with soothing and irritation—like severe blisters and rashes that can come on as a result of shingles, and is often suggested to be used along with an anti-viral medication your doctor will prescribe, says Dr. Rodney. “For the unbearable itch, apply a small amount of calamine lotion to the rash and [avoid] scratching at all costs,” she adds.

Chickenpox

While this illness requires a prescription resolve it, help keep your little one (or yourself!) from itching with some calamine lotion. “It can help with the itchy spots of chickenpox. It does not make them resolve any more quickly, but it does help relieve the itching,” says Dr. Rodney.

Hives

Calamine lotion can help “cool the affected area and reduce irritation,” Dr. Rodney says. If you have hives, use a cloth to apply the lotion to the area and let it dry.

Poison ivy, oak, or sumac

“The anti-inflammatory properties help with the irritation and inflammation,” says **Gary Goldenberg, M.D.**, assistant clinical professor of dermatology at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai in New York City. “It also absorbs the oozing that occurs from the blisters.” If you have a mild case of poison ivy, Dr. Rodney recommends washing the area with warm water then applying the lotion to relieve the itch.

Mosquito bites (or any itchy bug bite)

Calamine lotion “helps with the itching and irritation of bites,” Dr. Goldenberg says. Whatever you do, resist the urge to scratch. “Stop scratching the bump and apply a small amount of calamine lotion to the affected area,” Dr. Rodney says. “Reapply as needed, minimizing scratching as much as possible.”

How to apply calamine lotion

On a basic level, you'll want to clean the area with soap and water before you apply calamine lotion. Then, shake up the bottle and dab the lotion onto the affected skin with a cotton ball, cotton swab, or cloth. Keep in mind, though, that you don't want to apply it to open or raw skin. (Do not ingest the stuff, and avoid applying it around the eyes or mucous membranes, like the inside of your mouth, nose, or genitals.)

If you use calamine lotion and your rash or itch isn't improving after several days, Dr. Zeichner says it's time to call your doctor, who may recommend a prescription-strength cream instead.

Looking to add some to your medicine cabinet? Try one of these to ease your itch:



Caladryl Calamine Lotion

amazon.com

~~\$7.76~~

\$5.47 (30% off)

SHOP NOW

Humco's calamine lotion creates a cooling feel as it dries on your skin.



Solimo Medicated Calamine Lotion

amazon.com

\$2.49

SHOP NOW

This bottle offers 6 ounces of lotion for under \$3.00.



Aveeno Anti-Itch Lotion

\$9.07

SHOP NOW

This lotion contains calamine (and an oat complex) to help soothe itchy skin.



Walgreens Calamine Itch Relief Spray

walgreens.com

\$8.79

SHOP NOW

Just point this at your bump or rash and spray for relief.