



## **Position Statement**

### **Safe and Appropriate Use of Topical Corticosteroids**

#### *Misuse of Topical Corticosteroids for Skin Bleaching, and Its Associated Harms*

### **Introduction**

Topical corticosteroid (i.e. glucocorticoid or “steroid”) preparations are commonly prescribed and are listed by the World Health Organization as essential drugs for treating a broad range of inflammatory skin disorders including Psoriasis and Eczema. They are generally classified according to strength into different categories, for instance, ‘mild,’ ‘moderately potent,’ ‘potent,’ and ‘very potent’. These medications are highly effective when used for appropriate indications and prescribed duration, but need careful close monitoring to avert well-known long-term harmful cutaneous and systemic side effects.

The misuse of potent (i.e. greater than mild) topical corticosteroids either alone or in combination with other ingredients (e.g. antibiotics, antifungals, antiprotozoal, and certain skin lightening agents) in the same formulation (known as fixed drugs combination), has increased in many parts of the world. This is largely due to over-the-counter availability, relaxed/ unregulated sales without prescription, and/or use by practitioners without appropriate training. The International League of Dermatological Societies (ILDS) has received reports of these potentially unsafe and harmful topical corticosteroid practices from several of its member organisations.

### **The Scope of Topical Corticosteroid Misuse**

Potent topical corticosteroid products can provide rapid but temporary symptom relief by suppressing skin inflammation and alleviating itch. However, in doing so, their use may mask the primary dermatosis and/or modify the clinical presentation resulting in diagnostic challenges. As they are also relatively inexpensive and, in some countries, available without prescription, they are often used without medical supervision as primary therapy to treat a variety of different skin disorders (e.g. fungal infections, scabies infestations, acne, hyperpigmentation, and diseases of the external ears and eyes).

### **Skin Lightening and Corticosteroid Misuse**

A particularly concerning pattern of misuse is the widespread use of potent topical corticosteroids as skin bleaching agents. Skin bleaching is a widespread practice across many parts of Africa, Asia, South America, and the Caribbean, driven by psychosociocultural pressures favouring lighter skin tones. The global skin lightening industry is expanding rapidly, and its market size was recorded at USD 8.5 billion in 2023, with a projection to reach 15.5 billion by 2032. In some countries (e.g. India), facial skin lightening products, which often include potent and super-potent corticosteroids, represent a significant proportion of the skincare market. These products are often available without medical oversight, posing significant health risks.



Corticosteroids are sought after because of their ability to lighten skin by reducing melanin production. Research has indicated that prolonged use of skin bleaching products can lead to several adverse effects. These include skin thinning, stretch marks, bruising, persistent redness (erythema), the appearance of small blood vessels (telangiectasia), photosensitivity, and irreversible pigmentation changes (Ochronosis). There have also been reports of Glaucoma, femoral head osteonecrosis, and fungal and bacterial infections linked to their use.

The growing trend of over-the-counter (OTC) “lightening” creams containing ingredients like corticosteroids, has exacerbated the physical and psychological side effects that can ensue with these ingredients. In India, for example, the “topical corticosteroid damaged face” phenomenon has been widely reported.

## **Misuse in Treating Skin Conditions**

In addition to their misuse for skin “lightening”, corticosteroids are often incorrectly used in treating skin conditions, leading to intermittent and incomplete treatment, and relapses after withdrawal.

Public health implications of misuse include:

- a. incomplete resolution of skin disorders and relapse of the condition on withdrawal. In addition, steroid dependency and/or tachyphylaxis may develop.
- b. increased numbers and severity of skin infections caused by bacteria, fungi, viruses, or scabies, with a higher risk of transmission to others; particularly, a rapid increase in cases of treatment-resistant fungal infections.
- c. direct corticosteroid side effects that range from local cutaneous side effects such as skin atrophy, bruising, exacerbation of acne or rosacea, striae formation, ulceration, potential carcinogenicity and hypertrichosis to more serious systemic side effects due to adrenal suppression or leading to Cushing’s syndrome, particularly in infants. Restriction of foetal growth in pregnancy has also been recorded. Some of these side effects are irreversible and can have lasting serious effects on health and quality of life.
- d. damage to self-esteem and consequent long-lasting mental health effects.

## **Action and Recommendations**

On behalf of the global dermatology community, the ILDS affirms that:

- Topically applied corticosteroids, other than those of mild strength, whether used alone or combined with other pharmacologically active compounds such as antimicrobials, should only be prescribed and used under the supervision of an appropriately trained healthcare professional.
- Drug regulatory authorities, in their respective countries, implement and enforce regulations that prohibit the use of monotherapy and/or fixed-dose combinations (FDC) containing potent or super potent corticosteroids without a prescription from an appropriately trained healthcare professional.
- Clear guidelines should be established to protect patients and the public from the risks of overuse and misuse of potent topical steroids.



## International League of Dermatological Societies

*Skin Health for the World*

- Global and regional campaigns are needed to educate the public about the dangers of skin bleaching.
- It is important to dismantle and expose the risks associated with harmful beauty standards that promote skin bleaching.
- Unpacking the psychosociocultural nuances of skin “lightening” is essential, and education in primary schools is crucial.
- It is important to reinforce the notion that **"the best skin is the one you are born with."**

The ILDS reaffirms its commitment to advocating for the safe and appropriate use of topical corticosteroids, while simultaneously raising awareness of the public health crisis associated with skin lightening/bleaching.



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**The ILDS is an umbrella organisation for professional dermatological organisations. Our goal is to improve skin health for all people around the world through partnerships, policy, education, and training.**

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