



# Coal Tar Applications

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## What is Coal Tar?

Coal tar is a thick, heavy oil that has been used to treat psoriasis for hundreds of years. It is thought to have anti-inflammatory and anti-scaling properties that are useful in treating plaque psoriasis. The treatments are topical (applied to skin) and come in lotion, cream, ointment, shampoo, and bath additive forms.

Traditional coal tar treatments were made up in a hospital pharmacy and were smelly, messy, and difficult to use. In contrast, most modern coal tar applications are more cosmetically acceptable. Coal tar treatments are shampoos, lotions, creams or ointments and are rubbed in to the plaques of psoriasis. These treatments are referred to as 'topical treatments'.

## When should Coal Tar treatments be used?

Many people with psoriasis will try a coal tar treatment at some point. They are most commonly used for scalp psoriasis, although some people may also use coal tar to treat plaque psoriasis on other parts of the body too.

Some coal tar treatments can be bought 'over the counter' (without a prescription) from a pharmacy or supermarket. They can also be prescribed by your doctor, although it is recommended that other topical treatments such as vitamin Ds and topical steroid treatments are tried in various strengths and combinations first. This is because research has found that vitamin D or topical steroid treatments are more likely to be more effective at treating psoriasis. However, this does not mean that coal tar treatments do not work for some people – they can be an effective and useful treatment for psoriasis, and are more suitable for longer-term use than some other topical treatments.

It is recommended that a review appointment is arranged four weeks after starting any new topical treatment (two weeks for children), so that your doctor can assess what the results of the treatment are so far, and to check if you need any help with using the treatment.

As with all topical treatments, it may take a number of weeks of use for a coal tar treatment to become fully effective.

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## How should Coal Tar treatments be used?

Contact between coal tar products and non-psoriasis skin is not usually harmful, and so it can be used for widespread or small plaque psoriasis. Not all coal tar treatments are the same, and it is important to check with your doctor or pharmacist that the coal tar treatment you have been prescribed is suitable for all the body areas you need to use it in.

## Side effects and things to look out for when using Coal Tar treatments

Coal tar treatments can sometimes cause skin irritation, and should not be used on inflamed or broken skin, near to the eyes or on genital areas. Depending on the particular product used, it may stain clothes and other items that come into contact with the treatment. Some coal tar treatments are thought to increase a person's sensitivity to sunlight, so unnecessary exposure to the sun (including the use of sunbeds) should be avoided.

## Types of Coal Tar Treatment

The following coal tar treatments are prepared by the manufacturer (proprietary). In exceptional circumstances (when the proprietary applications have not been successful), a dermatologist may prescribe a generic treatment that is mixed by the pharmacist (non-proprietary). This is often referred to as a 'special', with costs and availability varying around the country. Some coal tar treatments are not suitable for use in children, or can only be used in exceptional circumstances on the advice of your doctor. Do check with the person who has prescribed the treatment if you have any questions or concerns. It is important you also read the patient information leaflet enclosed with the treatment, and follow any advice given by a GP or Pharmacist.

## Topical Coal Tar Applications

**Exorex** Lotion - Contains 5% coal tar solution.

**For use in adults and children over 12 years of age** - Apply a thin layer two to three times per day to the affected areas. Massage gently and leave to dry.

**For children under 12 years of age** – Exorex may be diluted by mixing with a few drops of freshly boiled and cooled water in the palm of the hand.

**Psoriderm** Cream- Contains 6% coal tar solution.

**For use in adults and children** - Apply directly to the affected skin or scalp 1-2 times daily or as advised by your GP. Leave to dry.

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## Coal Tar Shampoos and Scalp Applications

**Alphosyl 2 in 1** - *Shampoo*, alcoholic coal tar extract 5%.

**For use in adults and children over 12 years of age** - Use once or twice weekly by massaging into wet hair as you would a normal shampoo. It may be helpful to leave on the scalp for 5-10 minutes before washing off and then repeating the process. Remember that it is important to always treat the scalp rather than the hair.

**Children under 12 years of age** - Coal tar preparations have been used in children for many years, but since there is very little documented clinical data in children under 12 years of age, Alphosyl 2 in 1 Shampoo should be used with caution in children and only on the recommendation of a doctor or pharmacist.

**Capasal** - *Shampoo*, coal tar 1%, coconut oil 1%, salicylic acid 0.5%

**For use in adults and children** - Apply daily if necessary by massaging a small amount (approximately the size of a fifty pence piece for short hair) into the scalp, reducing to once or twice a week as the condition improves. Leave it on for a few minutes before washing out thoroughly. Repeat if necessary.

**Cocois** - *Scalp ointment*, coal tar solution 12%, salicylic acid 2%, precipitated sulphur 4%, in a coconut oil emollient basis.

**For use in adults and children over 12 years of age** - To be applied to the scalp daily and left in place for one hour before being washed off with warm water. This should be continued for 3-7 days until improvement has been achieved. Intermittent repeated applications may be necessary afterwards.

Cocois can be used in children aged between 6 and 12 years of age on the recommendation of a doctor or pharmacist. It is not recommended for use in children under 6 years of age.

**Polytar** – *Shampoo*, coal tar 4%.

**For use in adults and children over 12 years of age** - Use once or twice weekly by wetting the hair and massaging the product vigorously into the scalp. Leave for 3-5 minutes before rinsing thoroughly and repeating. If no improvement is seen after four weeks, see your GP.

**Children under 12 years of age** – Polytar should only be used on the recommendation of a doctor or pharmacist.

**Psoriderm** - *Scalp lotion*, coal tar 2.5%, lecithin 0.3%.

**For use in adults and children** - Use as a traditional shampoo, daily if necessary, by massaging into the affected area and leaving for a few minutes. Reduce usage to once or twice a week as the condition improves.

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**Sebco** - *Scalp ointment*, coal tar solution 12%, salicylic acid 2%, precipitated sulphur 4%, in a coconut oil emollient basis.

**For use in adults and children over 12 years of age** - Apply to the scalp daily for the first 3–7 days, then once or twice a week as required. Shower off after 1 hour.

**For children aged 6 years – 12 years of age** – Sebco should only be used on the recommendation of a doctor or pharmacist. It is not recommended for use in children under 6 years of age.

**Neutrogena T/Gel** - *Shampoo*, coal tar extract 2%.

**For use in adults and children over 12 years of age** - Apply liberally 2-3 times weekly by massaging into the wet scalp as you would a traditional shampoo. Leave for several minutes, before rinsing and repeating. If no improvement is seen after six weeks, see your GP.

It is not recommended for use in children under 12 years of age.

The information in this resource is not intended to replace that of a healthcare professional. If you have any concerns or questions about your treatments, do discuss this with your doctor or pharmacist and **always read the patient information leaflet** to make sure you are using them correctly.

For more information, or for a list of resources included in this information sheet, please contact the Psoriasis Association.

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