

Making Herbal Creams Using Base Cream

Creams are viscous emulsions of semi-solid consistency and are used to apply medicaments to the body. This is usually for the treatment of local skin conditions, but sometimes as a means of systemic administration. They are usually of oil in water (non-greasy) type but can also be of water in oil (greasy) type. Medicaments are either in solution or in suspension, to facilitate their even distribution throughout the cream.

Traditional Use of Creams

Cream-making is as old as time for medical herbalists. The process requires the use of an emulsifying agent(s) such as wool or pig fat or beeswax (for oily creams), or waxes, polysorbates, cetostearyl alcohol and triethanolamine soaps for aqueous creams.

While creams are often used to deliver cosmetic or nutritive ingredients to promote skin health, medical herbalists apply creams as a dosage form to deliver plant medicines. They are generally less oily and more cosmetically acceptable than ointments or balms. Creams make an ideal delivery vehicle, particularly for dermatological conditions or localised conditions such as muscular aches and pains. The higher oil content of ointments can give them a longer duration of action or reduce moisture loss from sensitive skin or dry eczema. Creams are generally preferable when treating wet or oozing forms of inflammatory skin conditions, and can produce a faster onset of action.

While many herbalists enjoy manufacturing their own creams from scratch, this can be time-consuming and challenging. Unless the formulation and manufacturing is done properly, problems such as 'cracking' (separation of the aqueous and oil phases) and microbial contamination and growth can occur over time. Careful attention needs to be given to ensure adequate preservation. There are now various natural preservatives available such as totarol and rosemary extracts. But ensuring broad spectrum antibacterial and antifungal activity is achieved can be difficult, especially against gram-negative bacteria, and some yeasts and moulds. When choosing the emulsifying agent for a particular cream, the possibility of incompatibility between the cream and the other ingredients or preservatives must be considered. Incompatibilities may also arise if two different creams are mixed.

Therefore, most herbal practitioners prefer to either prescribe pre-formulated and manufactured proprietary products, or make up their cream formulations by adding their individualized ingredients to a base cream.

Base Cream Application

An ideal base cream should be manufactured using natural ingredients only, and have no synthetic preservatives, petroleum-derived ingredients or animal products. This ensures it is gentle on both the skin and nature. It should also have the physical capability to retain appropriate levels of herbal extracts, and in different formats. These can include hydroethanolic liquid extracts (tinctures), essential oils, infused herbal oils, CO₂ extracts, or simply an aqueous herbal concentrate (infusion or decoction).

If anything other than neat hydroethanolic liquid extracts or essential oils are to be included in the formulation, some form of shelf life validation is recommended prior to dispensing creams by adding additional ingredients to the base cream. Base cream formulations have been developed and shown to be able to withstand the addition of many different ingredients and still be microbially intact. But if aqueous or non-ethanolic extracts or essential oil ingredients are proposed, or the ethanol has been evaporated off

from the hydroethanolic liquid extract concerned, then care should be taken. Too much ethanol or too high a percentage of hydroethanolic liquid extracts, can be irritating or cause burning when applied to inflamed acute skin conditions, or when applied to sensitive mucous membranes.

When using hydroethanolic liquid herbal extracts, it is recommended to add these to a total level of between 10% and 20% of the overall starting weight of the base cream. Add one herbal extract at a time, with continuous stirring to ensure optimal incorporation and uniform consistency. This usually takes just a few minutes, depending on the particular herbal extract(s) being used.

The Mixing & Making Process

Mixing can occur in a suitable mixing bowl or pyrex jug, using a sterilized spoon or spatula. The final herbal cream can then be spooned or poured into jars, capped and then labelled. The details of the label will depend on whether you have made a herbal cream just for your patient, or whether you are going to sell this to other individuals. If the latter, please check regulatory requirements and be cautious about making therapeutic claims, either in the product name or associated information. There are significant differences between compounding a product for an individual patient, and manufacturing a product for retail or general sale.

Herbal Cream Formulations

There are an infinite number of different formulations that can be made by adding herbal extracts to a base cream. Here are a few examples below using Phytomed liquid herb extracts and Phytomed Base Cream.

COMFREY CREAM

Comfrey Root (1:10): 20%
Base Cream: 80%

CALENDULA CREAM

Calendula Flower (1:2): 10%
Base Cream: 90%

KANUKA CREAM

Kanuka Oil: 1%
Kānuka Herb (1:2): 15%
Base Cream: 84%

ATHLETES FOOT CREAM

Garlic Bulb (1:1): 5%
Calendula Flower (1:2): 10%
Manuka Essential Oil: 2%
Thyme Essential Oil: 1%
Base Cream: 82%

ITCHY RESCUE CREAM

St John's Wort Herb (1:2): 5%
Calendula Flower (1:2): 5%
Liquorice Root (1:1): 5%
Chickweed Herb (1:2): 5%
Base Cream: 80%

ECZEMA CREAM

Poroporo Leaf (1:2): 5%
Koromiko Herb (1:2): 5%
Akeake Leaf (1:2): 5%
Kawakawa Leaf (1:2): 5%
Base Cream: 80%

CHILDREN'S ECZEMA CREAM

Chamomile Flower (1:2): 5%
Calendula Flower (1:2): 5%
Koromiko Herb (1:2): 5%
Base Cream: 80%
Evening Primrose Oil/Vitamin E Oil Capsules: 5%
(Add 5 capsules of 1000mg evening primrose oil or high-grade vitamin E oil capsules to the ingredients and blend well.)

ANTISEPTIC CREAM

Coptis Rhizome (1:2): 5%
Tanekaha Leaf (1:2): 10%
Mānuka Herb (1:2): 5%
Base Cream: 80%
(NB: this is a bright yellow-orange colour due to its high berberine content.)