

Efudex / 5-Fluorouracil

What is it?

Efudex is a cream that is prescribed to treat pre-cancerous skin growths caused by the sun, known as actinic keratoses. It is also referred to as 5-fluorouracil or simple 5-FU. Fluorouracil reacts against the pre-cancerous sun-damaged skin to destroy the abnormal cells.

How do I use it?

It is important to use fluorouracil cream exactly as directed by your doctor. Make sure you understand the directions. Do not use fluorouracil cream more often or longer than directed by your doctor.

1. Wash the affected area and dry completely before applying fluorouracil cream.
2. Apply fluorouracil cream in a thin layer over the entire affected area. It can be applied using a nonmetal applicator, a glove or your fingertips. If you apply fluorouracil cream using bare fingertips, wash your hands thoroughly, immediately afterwards.
3. Do not cover the treated areas with a bandage or dressing unless your doctor tells you to.
4. Do not apply to the eyelids, eyes, nose, or mouth unless directed by your doctor. If these areas come in contact with fluorouracil cream, rinse thoroughly with plenty of water.
5. Do not let children or pets touch or lick your skin where the drug is applied.

What can I expect when I use it?

Your damaged skin usually becomes red, crusty, irritated, and peels, and you will experience a burning or sore sensation that is mild and tolerable. This usually occurs after 1-2 weeks of use. This effect may last for several weeks after you stop treatment with fluorouracil cream.

If you are treating multiple zones at once, you may wish to treat only a few areas at a time for your comfort. Do not start treatment if you have an important event (such as a party or wedding) in the next month. There is some downtime associated with using the cream.

Your skin may sunburn easily while using fluorouracil cream and for several weeks after you stop using fluorouracil cream. You should avoid sun exposure while using the cream and for 1 month afterwards. It is best to use this cream in the colder months when the sun isn't as strong.

When should I STOP?

Stop applying the medication if you experience a severe blistering reaction or severe pain.

Who should not use this cream?

Women who are pregnant or trying to become pregnant should not use this cream. Men who are trying to conceive should not use this cream.

What to do if you cannot tolerate this cream?

There are alternatives for treating actinic keratoses if you cannot tolerate Efudex. These include liquid nitrogen and photodynamic therapy (PDT); it is often referred to as light therapy or Metvix. The procedure is typically done in the doctor's office and there is a less vigorous reaction with a shorter downtime - the downside is that you need to pay for the treatment (it is not covered by the government), it is not as effective and usually requires more treatments, which is why we typically do not use it as first line. If this is something that interests you, please ask your Dermatologist about PDT. If you have a private drug plan, they may cover part of the treatment.