

# Skin changes and skin care during radiation therapy

Radiation therapy can cause skin changes because it can damage healthy skin cells in the area that is treated

## What skin changes can I expect?

The changes that happen are different for each person, depending on:

- the part of your body being treated
- how much radiation you are given
- whether you are having certain medicines at the same time.

Skin changes may include:

- changes in colour (pink to bright red)
- feeling warm to touch
- dry, itchy, flaky, or sensitive skin
- pain or swelling
- blisters or weeping
- bleeding (less common).

## How long will any changes last?

Skin changes usually begin about 14 to 21 days after radiation therapy starts.

They may get worse during the course of your treatment and be at their worst about a week or so after finishing treatment.

Your skin usually starts to improve after this and should be healing well by 4 to 6 weeks after the end of treatment.

### During treatment

Your radiation oncologist, radiation therapists and radiation therapy nurse will check your skin during your treatment and provide advice on appropriate management. Check with them before you use creams or moisturisers on your skin in the area of your body that is receiving radiation therapy.

**Contact your doctor or nurse immediately if you have:**

- a temperature of 38°C or higher
- problems with the treated area, including:
  - severe pain
  - continuing swelling, blistering, redness, bleeding or pus
  - sores and continuing ‘wet’ or moist skin.

**If you can't contact your doctor or nurse, go to the nearest hospital emergency department for help.**

## Things to ask your doctor or nurse

- ✓ Will I get a skin reaction?
- ✓ How can I reduce the skin reaction?
- ✓ Can I go swimming?
- ✓ What moisturiser should I use?

## Contact numbers

**Remember, talk to your doctor or nurse if you have any questions about your treatment.**

Daytime: \_\_\_\_\_

Night/weekend: \_\_\_\_\_

## Glossary

**Skin Reaction:** how the skin changes because of injury or damage.

**Erythema:** warm, reddened skin, which may feel itchy.

**Desquamation:** damage to the surface of the skin.

**Dry desquamation:** dry, flaky skin.

**Moist desquamation:** the skin surface is broken, swollen, and moist.

## Caring for your treatment area

### How do I care for the skin in the treatment area?

Your skin in the treatment area can become quite fragile and easily irritated during treatment.

- Gently clean the area with warm water and a mild unscented soap and rinse well.
- Gently pat the skin dry, rather than rubbing.
- Take short, lukewarm or cool baths and showers.
- Try saltwater baths if your skin is itchy.
- Moisturise the skin in the treatment area using products recommended by your treatment team.
- Start moisturising from the first day of treatment and apply at least twice daily.
- Try keeping the moisturiser in the fridge to help soothe the skin.
- Moisturising cream can be applied at any time, including before or after your radiation treatment.
- If you are applying moisturising cream before your radiation treatment, use only a small amount of cream and gently massage it for adequate absorption.
- If your skin is broken or has moist areas, ask your treatment team how to care for your skin.

### Are there products I shouldn't use on the area?

Ask your treatment team which products are safe to use. Some moisturiser, skincare and make-up products can make a skin reaction worse if used while you are having radiation therapy, including:

- alcohol
- perfumes
- additives
- products containing alpha hydroxy acids (AHAs)
- sucralfate
- sunblock
- corn starch
- talcum powder/baby powder.

You may be able to use some of these products again when your treatment has finished.

### Is there anything else I should avoid?

In the treatment area, you should avoid:

- rubbing/scratching the skin
- wearing tight-fitting clothing
- shaving with a razor (use an electric shaver)
- using wax or hair removal creams
- using any patches (ask your treatment team where they can be applied)
- using adhesive tape
- very hot or cold temperatures on the skin (e.g. hot or cold packs, electric blankets)
- wearing jewellery
- exposure to wind and sun
- friction and trauma.

### What should I do after radiation therapy?

It is important to continue to care for your skin while it heals.

- If the area is dry, red or itchy and your skin is not broken, continue to apply a moisturiser several times a day until it heals.
- If your skin is broken and there are moist areas, your treatment team will advise you how to look after the affected area.

### What about being outdoors?

You should protect yourself from the sun during and after your treatment.

- Wear a hat and try to stay in the shade.
- Wear loose fitting clothing that covers and protects the treatment area.
- After your treatment has finished use sunscreen with a high protection factor. During treatment do not use this on the treatment area.

Areas of your skin that react during radiation therapy will always be more sensitive and at risk of sun damage even when your treatment has finished. You will always need to protect this area during treatment from the sun.

For information for patient and carers scan the QR code



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