



Radiotherapy can cause skin changes because it can damage healthy skin cells in the area that is treated. This is similar to the way that radiation from the sun can cause sunburn.

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
- whether you have other illnesses or conditions such as diabetes

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, weeping

How long will any changes last?

Skin changes usually begin about 10 to 14 days after radiotherapy starts.

They may get worse during the course of your treatment.

Changes can be at their worst about a week or so after your treatment finishes.

Your skin usually starts to improve after this.

By 4 to 6 weeks after finishing radiotherapy, it should be healing well.

Important

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.

Q During treatment

Your radiation therapists and radiotherapy 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 radiotherapy.

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
- Rinse well after washing
- Gently pat the skin dry, rather than rubbing
- Take short, lukewarm or cool baths and showers
- Try salt water 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 soothe the skin
- Do not apply cleansers or moisturisers **within two hours before treatment.**

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

Some products can make any skin damage worse if you use them while you are having radiotherapy.

These include:

- deodorants on broken or irritated skin
- talcum powder
- aftershave
- makeup
- dressings and creams containing metals or petroleum
- sunblock

Talk with your treatment team if you are not sure whether it is safe to use a certain product.

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 area of your body that is receiving radiation, you should avoid:

- rubbing the skin
- wearing tight-fitting clothing
- shaving with a razor blade (use an electric shaver)
- using wax or hair removal creams
- using any patches (including pain patches)
- using adhesive tape (as with dressings)
- letting the area get very hot or cold (e.g. hot or cold packs)

Common questions

What should I do after radiotherapy?

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.
- Wear loose fitting, cotton clothing.
- Use sunscreen with a high protection factor (but do not use this on the treatment site during treatment)
- Try to stay in the shade.

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

Things to ask your doctor or nurse

- ✓ Will I get a skin reaction?
- ✓ How can I reduce the damage to my skin?
- ✓ Can I go swimming?

Contact numbers:

Daytime:

Night/weekend:

Glossary

Skin Reaction = how the skin changes because of injury or damage

Erythema = warm, reddened skin, which may feel itchy - similar to sunburn

Desquamation = damage to the surface of the skin

Dry desquamation = dry, flaky skin

Moist desquamation = the skin surface is broken, swollen, and moist

Working together to lessen the impact of cancer

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