PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

Cryotherapy for Skin Lesions

This information explains what cryotherapy (KRY-oh-THAYR-uh-pee) is and how to care for yourself after your cryotherapy procedure. Cryotherapy is a procedure that uses extreme cold (liquid nitrogen) to freeze and destroy tissue.

What is cryotherapy used for?

Cryotherapy is often used to treat skin lesions. Skin lesions are skin growths or patches that don't look like the skin around them. The lesions can be:

- Benign (not cancerous).
- Actinic keratosis. These are precancerous skin cancers that look like scaly patches on your skin, and they can turn into cancer in the future.
- Superficial skin cancer (skin cancer that's on the surface of your skin).

Cryotherapy also helps save the area around the lesions and to reduce the scarring as much as possible.

What To Expect Before and During Cryotherapy

You don't have to do anything to get ready for cryotherapy, but you may need to take off any makeup, lotion, or powder before your procedure.

During your cryotherapy, your healthcare provider will spray liquid nitrogen on the area being treated to freeze it.

Skin Healing After Cryotherapy

The treated area will become red soon after your procedure. It may also blister and swell. If this happens, don't break open the blister. You may also see clear drainage on the treated area. This is normal.

The treated area will heal in about 7 to 10 days. It probably won't leave a scar.

How To Care for Yourself After Cryotherapy

- Starting the day after your procedure, wash the treated area gently with fragrance-free soap and water every day.
- Put Vaseline® or Aquaphor® on the treated area every day for 2 weeks. This will help the area heal and will keep it from crusting. If the treated area does develop a crust, you can put petroleum jelly (Vaseline) on the area until the crust falls off.

- Leave the treated area uncovered. If you have any drainage, you can cover the area with a bandage (Band-Aid®).
- If you have any bleeding, press firmly on the area with a clean gauze pad for 15 minutes. If the bleeding doesn't stop, repeat this step. If the bleeding still hasn't stopped after repeating this step, call your doctor's office.
- Don't use scented soap, makeup, or lotion on the treated area until it's fully healed. This will usually be at least 10 days after your procedure.
- You may lose some hair on the treated area. This depends on how deep the freezing went. This hair loss may be permanent.
- Once the treated area has healed, apply a broad-spectrum sunscreen with an SPF of at least 30 to the area to protect it from scarring.
- You may have discoloration (pinkness, redness, or lighter or darker skin) at the treated area for up to 1 year after your procedure. Some people may have it for even longer, or it may be permanent.

When To Call Your Doctor or Nurse

Call your doctor or nurse if you have:

- A fever of 100.4 °F (38 °C) or higher.
- Chills (Feeling cold and shivering).
- Any of the following symptoms at or around the treated area:
  - Redness or swelling that extends to areas of untreated skin.
  - Increasing pain or discomfort in the treated area.
  - Skin in the treated area that's hot or hard to the touch.
  - Increasing oozing, or drainage (yellow or green) from the treated area.
  - A bad smell.
  - Bleeding that doesn't stop after applying pressure.
- Any questions or concerns.
- Any problems you didn't expect.

If you have questions or concerns, contact your healthcare provider. A member of your care team will answer Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Outside those hours, you can leave a message or talk with another MSK provider. There is always a doctor or nurse on call. If you're not sure how to reach your healthcare provider, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

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