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PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

# Skin Care Guidelines While You Are Receiving Radiation Therapy

This information describes skin reactions to look out for during your radiation therapy and how to manage them.

## Skin Reactions from Radiation Therapy

Skin changes are common and expected during radiation therapy. Each person reacts to treatment in a different way.

The type of skin reaction that you may get depends on:

- The part of your body that's being treated.
- The type and dose of radiation that you get.

Tell your doctor or nurse if you smoke or if you have:

- High blood pressure
- Diabetes
- Any collagen vascular diseases, such as rheumatoid arthritis or dermatomyositis (a disease that causes a skin rash and muscle weakness)
- A history of skin cancer in the area to be radiated

These conditions may affect how your wounds heal and how much of a reaction you have to radiation therapy.

## Types of skin reactions during radiation therapy

During radiation therapy, your skin may become pink or tanned. at the treatment site. As your treatment continues, your skin may become bright red, or very dark, and may become swollen. Your skin may also feel dry, feel tight, be itchy, and look flaky.

Some people develop a rash or blisters in the area where they are getting radiation therapy. These blisters may open and peel. If you develop skin reactions, these will most likely peak up to 2 weeks after your last treatment. It may take several weeks for your skin to improve after you finish your radiation therapy.

While you're receiving your treatments, you will be seen weekly by your radiation team. They will examine your skin and make recommendations for changes in your skin care, as needed.

## Caring for Your Skin During Radiation Therapy

### Keep your skin clean

- Bathe or shower daily using warm water and a mild unscented soap, such as Neutrogena<sup>®</sup>, Dove<sup>®</sup>, baby soap, Basis<sup>®</sup>, or Cetaphil<sup>®</sup>. Rinse your skin well and pat it dry with a soft towel.
- When washing, be gentle with your skin in the area being treated. Don't use a washcloth, scrubbing cloth, loofah or brush.
- The tattoo marks you received before your treatment are permanent and won't wash off. You may get other markings during treatment such as an outline of your treatment area with a purple felt-tipped marker. You can remove these markings with mineral oil when your radiation therapists say it's okay.
- **Don't use alcohol or alcohol pads on your skin in the area being treated.**

## **Moisturize your skin often**

- Start using a moisturizer when you begin treatment. This can help to minimize any skin reaction. You can use an over-the-counter moisturizer. When choosing a moisturizer pick one that does not have any fragrances or lanolin. There are a number of products that are good to use, and your nurse may suggest one of these to you. Use only one at a time unless your nurse tells you to use more.
- You may be prescribed a medication either at the start, or during, your radiation therapy to treat itchy skin. There are a number of products that are good to use, and your nurse may suggest one of these to you. Use only one at a time unless your nurse tells you to use more.
- Apply the moisturizer 2 times a day.
- Don't apply moisturizers to open areas on your skin.

## **Avoid irritating your skin in the treatment area**

- Wear loose-fitting, cotton clothing over the treated area.
- Use only the moisturizers, creams, or lotions that are recommended by your doctor or nurse.
- Don't use makeup, perfumes, powders, or aftershave in the area being treated.
- You can use deodorant on intact skin in the area being treated. Stop using it if your skin becomes irritated.
- Don't shave the treated skin. If you must shave, use an electric razor and stop if the skin becomes irritated.
- Don't put any tape on the treated skin.
- Don't let your treated skin come into contact with extreme hot or cold temperatures. This includes hot tubs, water bottles, heating pads, and ice packs.
- Don't apply any patches to the treated area, including pain patches.
- If your skin is itchy, don't scratch it. Ask your nurse for recommendations

on how to relieve the itching.

- If you don't have any skin reactions during the treatment, you can swim in a chlorinated pool. However, be sure to rinse off the chlorine right after getting out of the pool.
- Avoid tanning or burning your skin during and after you're finished with treatment. If you're going to be in the sun, use a PABA-free sunblock with an SPF of 30 or higher. Also, wear loose-fitting clothing that covers you as much as possible.

## **Call Your Doctor or Nurse if You Have:**

- A temperature of 100.4 °F (38 °C) or higher
- Chills
- Increasing pain or discomfort
- Increased redness or swelling or skin that is hard or hot to the touch
- A rash or blistering of your skin in the treated area
- Drainage from your skin in the treated area
- Any new open areas or changes to your skin
- Any other new symptoms or problems

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](http://www.mskcc.org/pe) to search our virtual library.

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