

Skin Care During Radiation Therapy

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It is common for your skin to become red during radiation therapy. This redness is a temporary side effect of radiation treatment.

Changes in your skin usually occur one to two weeks into treatment and may last a month after the last treatment. The amount of skin redness or irritation depends on the part of the body being treated and the dose of radiation. Your nurse will review the following guidelines with you and will answer any questions you may have.

Helpful Hints for Skin Care

- Apply moisturizers to the skin as directed by your nurse. Do not use moisturizers within two hours before your radiation treatment. Moisturizers work best when applied just after bathing, while the skin is damp. Continue to moisturize your skin in this area for at least a month after treatments are completed, and then as needed.
Suggested moisturizers include:
 - Protect the skin in and around the treatment area from extremely hot or cold temperatures, especially in the summer and winter. Use soft, loose fitting, lightweight clothing to cover the treated area.
 - Permanent skin changes include increased sensitivity to hot and cold temperatures. If the area being treated is exposed to the sun, apply sunscreen routinely to the treatment site whenever you are outdoors for more than 10 minutes during the summer or winter. A PABA-free sunscreen with a minimum sun protection factor (SPF) of 30 should be used. Since the area being treated will always be more sensitive than the rest of your skin, continue to protect the area from sun exposure after your treatment ends.
 - Avoid extremes of temperature on the treatment area such as a heating pad, hot water bottle, ice packs, hot tubs, or saunas.
 - Always protect the treated area from chemicals, such as cleaning products that can cause irritation.
 - Do not keep your home too warm in the winter, and avoid staying outdoors for long periods during the hot summer months. Both can cause dry skin.
 - Bathe or shower only once a day. Bathe for only a short period of time, just long enough to cleanse yourself. Soap and water can cause your skin to become more dry.
 - Do not shave the treatment area. If you must shave, such as a beard, use an electric shaver.
 - Do not use deodorant soaps, which can dry the skin. Use moisturizing soaps that do not contain perfume or fragrances. Recommended soaps include:
 - Use warm water, rather than hot, to prevent your skin from becoming dry.
 - After bathing, pat the skin dry rather than rubbing it, especially at the treatment site.
 - Eat a balanced diet.
 - Drink at least eight glasses of fluids daily unless your doctor has restricted the amount of fluids you can drink due to another medical condition.
 - Check the skin at the treatment site daily. Report any changes to your nurse or doctor.
 - Do not use tape, bandages, or medicated patches in the treatment area.

- If you receive chemotherapy during or after radiation treatments, your skin may become red each time. This reaction is called “recall.” Your body is recalling, or remembering, that it had radiation therapy. If your skin becomes red or irritated again, follow the same care instructions you did during treatment. Be sure to tell the nurse or doctor administering your chemotherapy about your skin changes.
- You may take your prescribed pain medication as directed. If you experience discomfort and have no pain medication prescribed, you may take an over-the-counter pain relief medication.

Things to Report to Your Nurse or Doctor

Tell your nurse or doctor if you have any of the following symptoms:

- Blistered, swollen, or tender areas of the skin in and around the treatment area
- Pain or itching that is not helped by prescribed medications or recommended ointments
- Any new or unusual symptoms

In an Emergency Call:
