

Skin Care During and After Radiation

You are getting radiation therapy as part of your cancer treatment. Radiation can cause changes in your skin. This factsheet talks about these changes and ways to manage them.

Skin Changes

The effects of radiation on the skin depend on a number of things:

- Number of treatments
- Total radiation dose
- Sun exposure of the treated area before radiation
- Overall health

Skin changes happen only where the radiation enters and exits your body. If you aren't sure where these areas are, ask your radiation therapy team.

These skin changes may happen after a week or two of radiation treatment:

- Gets dry or itchy
- Turns darker, pink, or red
- Becomes sore and tender
- Peels or gets blisters

Radiation skin reactions happen slowly over time. They may last for a while after radiation treatments end. Most effects go away after 2–4 weeks. Take care of your skin from the first day of radiation, before side effects happen.

Hair loss. After about two weeks, you will start to lose hair in the area that was treated. It will usually begin to grow back within 3–6 months after radiation treatment ends. Hair loss may be permanent, depending on the amount of radiation you get.

Skin Care Hints

Here are some tips to help protect your skin:

- Wash gently with warm water. Do not scrub. Use your hands, not a washcloth. Pat dry with a soft towel.
- Use a mild soap without alcohol, perfumes, or deodorants.
- Avoid rubbing on treated skin. Wear loose-fitting clothing. Cotton fabrics are the least irritating.
- Do not use adhesive bandages or tape in the treated area.
- Avoid temperature extremes. Ask your radiation care team before using heating pads, hot water bottles, ice packs, or hot tubs.
- Keep treated skin protected from the sun. Use sunscreen with at least SPF 30 when outdoors. Wear a wide-brimmed hat and clothing that covers arms and legs. Do not use tanning beds.
- Use only an electric razor if you shave the area.

Managing Skin Changes

These suggestions can help manage skin changes:

- Use a moisturizing cream, lotion, gel, or oil on the treated area. Choose products for sensitive skin. Avoid products with alcohol, perfume, or deodorant.
- If a product stings, stop using it.
- If your skin becomes tender or itchy, try using a 1% hydrocortisone cream from the drugstore. If necessary, your cancer care team may prescribe a steroid cream.

Don't use lotion right before your radiation treatments. Put it on at least 4 hours before.