
Patient Information

Radiation Therapy and Caring for Your Skin

**Comments,
Feedback?**

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Your skin reactions will begin to disappear. It may take up to 2 months for your skin to return to normal.

When your skin returns to normal, you may begin to care for it as you did before starting the radiation therapy.

Will I have any long-term changes to my skin?

Some patients have little or no permanent changes to their skin after their radiation therapy. Some may get permanent changes like:

- Thinning skin;
- Lighter or darker skin colour;
- Permanent dryness of the skin;
- Permanent tiny red blood vessels that look like lines;
- Tightness;
- Greater chance of injuring your skin.

These changes may take years to develop. Your radiation oncologist and radiation therapy team can answer any questions or concerns that you may have. They are here to help you throughout your radiation therapy.

References:

Capital Health, Cancer Care Nova Scotia (2005), Skin Care During Radiation Treatment.

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Radiation Therapy and Caring for Your Skin

The purpose of this pamphlet is to give you information about caring for your skin during and after radiation therapy.

Radiation therapy is a cancer treatment that uses high-energy x-rays to kill cancer cells. The benefit of radiation therapy is that it directly targets the tumour in your body. This is called local treatment. The most common side effect of radiation therapy is a skin reaction.

What is a skin reaction?

A skin reaction is a change in your skin that may happen when you have radiation treatments. If the skin reacts, it will only happen in the area of your body being treated.

Skin reactions happen in stages and they are all considered normal. You may not get a skin reaction. If you do not get a reaction, this does not mean your treatment is not working.

Stage 1

- Skin reactions first occur within 7 to 10 days of your treatment.
- Your skin is warm to the touch and pink in the area where you are being treated.
- The skin may be dry and itchy.



gently pat off excess powder and **avoid** the following:

- ✗ Powder building up in skin folds.
- ✗ Powders containing talc or zinc oxide because these will interfere with your radiation treatments.
- ✗ Powder on wet, open sores.
- ✗ Make-up, deodorants, perfumes or body sprays on or near the skin being treated.

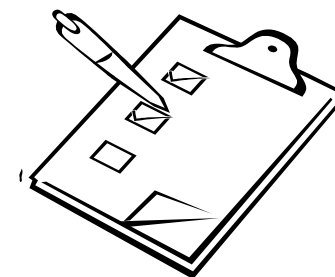
Medication for skin reactions

If your skin reaction becomes very irritated, painful or moist with peeling your radiation oncologist will prescribe anti-inflammatory creams and/or antibiotics to treat your symptoms.

Caring for Your Skin After Radiation Therapy

Once your radiation therapy is done, the skin in the area being treated may continue to change. These changes may include:

- Redness;
 - Itching;
 - Soreness;
 - Peeling;
 - Moist areas.
- ✓ Continue with the skin care instructions that you have been given by your radiation therapy team.
 - ✓ Continue to wash the treated areas as you did when you were having radiation treatment.



Can I swim in a pool or take a sauna?

Avoid swimming in pools while you are having treatments. The chemicals in the pool might make your skin reaction worse. You should also avoid the extreme heat of a sauna because it will also bother your skin.

Suggestions to help you manage skin reactions

When washing, showering and bathing:

- ✓ Use lukewarm water.
- ✓ Avoid the direct stream of the shower on your treated skin.
- ✓ Use a colourless, scent-free soap that is pH balanced (5.5). Ask your pharmacist for examples (e.g., Johnson & Johnson Baby Wash®, Dove® unscented, etc.).
- ✓ Use a very soft cloth or your hand to wash your skin. Rubbing and scrubbing will cause more damage to your skin.
- ✓ Pat your skin gently when drying. Rubbing and scrubbing will cause more damage.
- ✓ If you must shave on or near the area being treated, carefully use an electric shaver.



Powders, lotions and creams:

Check with your radiation therapy team **before** using any lotions and creams on the treated area. Applying a light dusting of cornstarch or unscented baby powder to the area being treated can prevent irritation from rubbing. When using powder, always



Stage 2

- Your skin becomes drier and itchier, with increased redness.
- Your skin will be sensitive to touch.
- It may look like you have a rash.

Stage 3

- Your skin may become red and tender near the 4th or 5th week of your treatment.
- You may have small blisters and your skin may peel.
- You may sweat or perspire less.

How are skin reactions cared for?

Each time you come in for treatment, your health care team will check to see how you are doing with your treatments. If you have a skin reaction, it will be assessed and you will be given information on how to care for your skin. If you have any questions about your skin, please contact your radiation nurse, therapist or doctor during your visit.



Caring for Your Skin During Radiation Therapy

Why are tattoos used?

You may get a permanent tattoo at your simulation or planning session. These tattoo marks are small and are usually not noticeable. The purpose of the mark is to help the radiation therapists be able to position you accurately for treatment. This is important so that the radiation hits the tumour in the same spot at all your treatments.

A permanent tattoo looks like a small freckle. It is placed on your skin using a small needle and it is done only once during your planning session. The radiation therapist will show you where the tattoo is on your body. These tattoos do not wash off.

Temporary marks may also be used. These marks can be coloured blue, black or green. They will fade and go away over time. Do not try to wash or scrub them off. Scrubbing the skin in the treatment area may cause a skin reaction.

Common questions when having radiation therapy

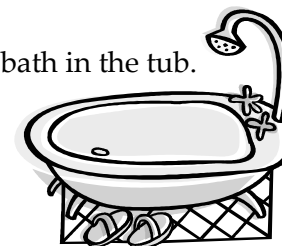
What kind of clothing should I wear?



Wear loose clothing made of comfortable cotton. Loose clothing will prevent rubbing against the skin being treated. Tight or scratchy clothing may cause some discomfort.

Can I wash, shower or take a bath?

Most patients can wash, shower or take a bath in the tub. Be gentle when cleaning the area that has been treated and use lukewarm water. Remember that your permanent tattoos will not wash off.

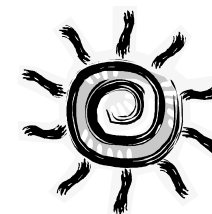


Can I use a hot water bottle, heating pad or cold pack on my skin?

Extreme heat or cold can make your skin reaction worse. **Do not use direct heat or cold on the area of skin being treated.** This includes hot water bottles, electric heating pads, Magic Bags®, ice packs and cold/hot therapy creams. Your skin will be very sensitive during radiation treatment.

What should I do when I go outside into the sun or cold weather?

Radiation therapy can cause the skin to be more sensitive. This sensitivity may stay for the rest of your life. Use a sun block with an SPF 15 or higher when you are outside because it is easier for your skin to get sunburned.



Cover up when it is cold because the skin is more sensitive to cold and wind.



Do not wear sunblock while you are having the actual treatment.