Radiation therapy 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. Ask your radiation therapist about your treatment area.

A skin reaction usually begins 2 weeks after you start your radiation treatments. It may slowly get worse as you receive more treatments.

You may not get a skin reaction. If you do not get a reaction, this does not mean your treatment is not working:

What are the symptoms of a skin reaction?

- Dry and itchy skin
- Tender
- Peeling
- Colour changes (pink to red)

Why does it happen?

A skin reaction happens when radiation affects the normal skin cells in the treatment area. Radiation causes normal skin cells to become irritated or damaged.
Caring for your skin during treatment

A good skin care routine will help with skin reactions during your radiation treatments. Start practicing good skin care on the day of your CT planning appointment. Your skin care routine may change as your skin changes.

How can I manage a skin reaction?

- Your health care team will instruct you to start moisturizing your skin at least 3 times per day with a lanolin-free unscented moisturizing cream such as Glaxal® base cream (see your pharmacist for more information). It is important that you do not apply the moisturizer on open skin or immediately before your treatment appointments. Your doctor may prescribe other creams for you to use as your skin changes.
- Be gentle with your skin (do not rub or scrub).
- Wash your skin with a mild, unscented, pH-balanced soap (ask your pharmacist) and then pat the area dry.
- Wear loose cotton clothing in the area of the skin reaction.
- Only use electric shavers for hair removal (on unbroken skin only).
- You may use deodorant or antiperspirant (on unbroken skin only).
- Avoid adhesive tapes or dressings, clothing or activities that rub on the area, and hot tubs. Swimming is only recommended if skin is unbroken and you moisturize afterwards.
- Do not expose the skin in the treatment area to the sun, artificial sunlight, or extreme cold and wind. Cover the skin with clothing or a hat.
- Do not use sunscreen on the skin in the treatment area until your treatment is finished and your skin has healed.
- Do not use creams or lotions (other than above), perfumes or colognes, sprays, powders, ointments or oils, ice packs or extreme temperatures.
- The use of Aloe Vera on your skin reaction is not recommended.
When do I need to seek help?

If you notice any skin changes, speak with a member of your health care team. Show your radiation therapist the skin reaction at your daily treatment or your nurse/doctor on your patient review day. They will assess your skin and teach you how to change your skin routine.

After treatment

It is normal for a skin reaction to get worse in the first few weeks after you finish your treatments. Your skin will continue to change for several weeks. Over the next month following your treatment, your skin should slowly improve and heal. Continue to follow the skin care instructions from your health care team until your skin has healed.

If your skin gets worse and you are not sure what to do, call the telephone triage nurse at the London Regional Cancer Program. During business hours (Monday to Friday, 8:30 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.), call 519.685.8600 and press option ‘3’. Have your chart number ready.

Will I have long-term changes to my skin?

When your skin heals, it may look a little different than it did before you started radiation treatments. The skin colour may look darker and tanned or lighter and paler. Your skin may also be thinner and tighter.

The skin in the treatment area will always be more sensitive to natural sunlight, artificial light and extreme temperatures. This area will require protective clothing or a sunscreen with SPF30 or higher.