The most common side effect from radiation treatments is a skin reaction. Regardless of what area of the body is being treated, most patients will have a skin reaction. It is important to remember that every one is different and will have a different skin reaction.

What is a skin reaction?

A skin reaction is the change that your skin may go through as a result of your radiation treatments. The skin reaction will only occur in the area of your body that is being treated. For example, if you are getting radiation treatments to your pelvis, you may have some changes to your skin in your pelvic area, and not on any other part of your body.

Some patients have a mild skin reaction, while others have a significant skin reaction. Skin reactions happen gradually and usually affect fair skinned patients more than dark skinned patients. Generally, there are several stages to a skin reaction:

• The first signs of a skin reaction will usually show up within the first 7 to 10 days of treatment. You may notice slight warmth and redness of the skin in the area being treated. At this point, the skin may become itchy and dry.
• After the skin has become slightly dry, reddened, and mildly itchy, it may become more intense with increased redness and itchiness that may be quite bothersome.
• Towards the end of your treatment, the skin in the treated area may become more reddened and moist. For some patients, small areas of skin may breakdown and have tiny “blister-like” areas.

How long will I have a skin reaction?

You may notice changes to your skin within the first 7 to 10 days of treatment. The reaction usually worsens as you continue with treatment. The reaction usually hits its “peak” during the last week of treatment.

For many, the skin continues to worsen for a small period of time after treatments are over. Eventually the skin reaction will begin to disappear as gradually as it came. Most patients find that it takes up to two months for their skin to heal.
How do I care for my skin reaction?

The following will help you manage the different stages of skin reaction:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>If you have…</th>
<th>We recommend…</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Just started treatment and have little or no skin changes…</td>
<td>• Using a water-based moisturizer, cream or gel from the following list:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Slight redness of the skin with a little warmth and mild itchiness…</td>
<td>• Lubriderm®</td>
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<tr>
<td>- In darker skinned patients, you may notice increased darkness of the</td>
<td>• Keri Lotion®</td>
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<td>skin with warmth and mild itchiness…</td>
<td>• Glaxal Base®</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Aquaphor®</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Eucerin® Calming cream</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Pure Aloe Vera gel</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Increased redness, warmth and worsening of the itchiness…</td>
<td>• Stop using the above creams/lotions.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Using 1% hydrocortisone cream. We will either supply you with the cream</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>or give you a prescription for it.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Do not use any creams you may have at home or buy at the store.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Moist areas of reddened skin and possibly small “blister-like” areas…</td>
<td>• Stop using the hydrocortisone cream.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Using a moist wound healing cream (Tegagel&lt;sup&gt;™&lt;/sup&gt; or Intrasite gel&lt;sup&gt;™&lt;/sup&gt;). We will either supply you with the cream or give you a prescription for it.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Flamazine® or Polysporin® may be prescribed if an infection is suspected*</td>
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<td>(note: tell your doctor if you have an allergy to Sulfa)</td>
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</table>

*Note: Apply any of the above creams, lotions or gels sparingly and not immediately before your treatment*
Is it OK for me to wash and bathe?

It is OK for you to wash and bathe. Follow these helpful hints to keep your skin reaction to a minimum:

- Shower or bathe with lukewarm water. **Never** use hot water.

- Try to **avoid** exposing the treatment area to the **direct** stream of the shower.

- Use mild and gentle scent-free soap.

- Use gentle washing with a soft cloth…no **rubbing** or **scrubbing** of the skin being treated.

- When drying off after bathing, pat the area dry very gently.

What else should I do to care for my skin during treatments?

- Do not use perfume, after-shave, or make-up in the treatment area.

- Do not scratch or rub your skin in the treatment area.

- Do not use adhesive tape or sticky bandages in the treatment area.

- Do not wear jewellery in the treatment area.
**Should I worry about my markings coming off?**

At your treatment planning appointment you will get both permanent tattoo marks and temporary ink marks. The temporary ink marks are usually coloured blue, black or green. You may wash these off when you go home and you should not worry about losing them.

The permanent tattoo marks are about the size of the tip of a pen. The number of tattoos varies from patient to patient. The Radiation Therapist who gives you the tattoos should point out to you exactly where they are. They are often very hard to find, as they are tiny.

**Do not ever worry that you have lost your tattoo marks… they are permanent, and can never be washed off.**

**Should I wear any different clothing near the area being treated?**

It is best to wear clothing that is not too tight. Loose clothing may reduce rubbing and friction against the skin that is being treated.

Harsh fabrics should not be worn against the treatment area as they may cause chafing. Fabrics that touch the skin in the area being treated should be soft and gentle, like cotton.

**Can I use hot water bottles or heating pads?**

You should never use any form of direct heat or direct cold on the area of the body that is being treated. This includes hot water bottles, electric heating pads, Magic bags©, ice packs, and “hot/cold” therapy creams.

The skin in the area being treated is very sensitive, especially to extreme heat or cold. By using any of the items listed above directly on your skin that is being treated, you may make your skin reaction or discomfort worse.
**Should I take care when going out into the sun or extreme cold?**

It is very important to keep the area of your body being treated out of the sun and extreme cold. The skin that is being treated is very sensitive to the sun, and will burn and tan more easily than the rest of your skin. It is also more sensitive to extreme cold, such as low temperatures and winds in winter.

While you are on treatment you should cover up and use hats, scarves, and clothing to protect your skin from the sun and cold.

When your treatments are finished you should avoid exposing the treated area to the sun. If sun exposure is unavoidable, use a sunscreen with a high SPF to help protect the skin that was treated. For many years after your treatments, the skin that was treated may continue to be more sensitive to the sun.

**Can I swim in a pool or use a sauna/steam room?**

It is best to avoid swimming in chlorinated water. The chlorine in the water may make your skin more irritated. Check with your oncologist about whether it is ok for you to swim during your treatments.

As well, the heat from the sauna or steam room may irritate or worsen your skin reaction.

**How do I care for my skin after my treatments are over?**

It is best to continue the same bathing and skin care that you used during your treatments until your skin has healed. For most patients, this usually means caring for their skin like they were during treatment for up to 6 weeks after treatments finish. Hydrocortisone cream should not be used for longer than 2 weeks after treatment is finished.
Will I have any long-term changes to my skin?

Some patients have little or no permanent changes to their skin as a result of their radiation treatments. For others, there may be some permanent changes. These changes may take years to develop. These may include:

- Thinning of the skin.
- Change in skin colour (pigmentation).
- Permanent dryness.
- Permanent tiny red lines (telangectasia).
- Tightness.
- More at risk to injury.

Your Radiation Oncologist can answer any questions you may have about these possible long-term side effects to your skin.

Questions you may want to ask Your Health Care Team

- What part of my body and skin is getting radiation?
- When should I expect to notice changes to the skin being treated?
- Can I use creams I have at home?
- Can I bathe and wash?
- Where can I buy Aloe Vera gel?
- How long will I have to take care of my skin differently?