

What to Expect During Treatment: Skin Care During Radiation Therapy

The most common side effect from radiation therapy 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. Very careful planning is done by your doctor to ensure that the effects to your skin are kept to a minimum.

What is a skin reaction?

A skin reaction is the changes 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 in your skin in your pelvic area, and not on any other part of your body. Some patients have little or no 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 being treated may actually become more reddened and moist. For some patients, small areas of skin may actually breakdown and have tiny “blister-like” open areas.

How do I care for my skin reaction?

The advice you will be given for managing and coping with your skin reaction will be based on the stage of your skin reaction. Every day you come for treatment, your health care team will be assessing how you are doing with your treatments. We are here to help you and your family through all aspects of your treatment. Please feel free to ask any questions you may have, especially with your skin care.



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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 your body 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 and 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?

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 all over and your skin has returned to normal, you should avoid exposing the treated area to the sun. If sun exposure is unavoidable, use a sunscreen with a high SPF of at least 15 to help protect the skin that was treated. For many years after your treatments, the skin that was treated will be very sensitive to the sun, and will burn and tan more easily than the rest of your skin.

Can I swim in a pool or take a sauna?

It is best to avoid swimming in chlorinated water and to avoid taking saunas while on treatment. The chlorine in the water may make your skin more irritated, and the heat from the sauna may also irritate or worsen your skin reaction.

Will I lose any hair as a result of my treatments?

Any hair that is in the treatment area will probably gradually fall out. There is an extra **information sheet** that should be given to you regarding hair loss from the scalp if you are having treatments to the brain.

Any other part of the body that is treated with radiation may result in hair loss. For example, some men lose hair off their chest as a result of their treatments to the chest. The hair loss is gradual, and will usually grow back in a few months. Check with your radiation oncologist whether the hair will grow back or not.

How long will I have a skin reaction?

Most patients notice the first changes to their skin about 1 to 2 weeks into treatment. The reaction usually worsens as the patient continues with treatment. The reaction may hit its “peak” during the last week of treatment **or** the first few week(s) after treatment is finished. Do not be surprised if your skin continues to worsen for a small period of time after your treatments are over. Eventually the skin reaction will begin to disappear as gradually as it came. Most patients find that it takes up to 2 months for their skin to return to normal.

Do I have to continue to 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 returned to normal. For most patients, this usually means caring for their skin like they were during treatment for up to 6 weeks.

Hydrocortisone cream should only be used for no 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 (telangiectasia)
- 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

- Exactly 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 special care of my skin?

Follow these helpful hints to keep your skin reaction to a minimum:

- Shower and 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 (like baby 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... no rubbing or scrubbing.

Should I worry about my markings coming off?

At your simulation or “marking” appointment, you will probably get both permanent tattoo marks and temporary ink marks. The temporary ink marks are used only for the simulation appointment, to help the radiation therapists do their measurements. These 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 a small freckle, and are also placed on your skin the day of your simulation appointment. The number of tattoos varies from patient to patient. The radiation therapist who gives you the tattoo 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 loose and not too tight. Loose clothing may prevent rubbing and friction of your clothing against the skin that is being treated.

Harsh fabrics, such as stiff lace, 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 to the skin, 100% cotton is best.