

SKIN CARE DURING RADIATION THERAPY

Skin reactions are a common side effect of radiation therapy treatment. These reactions vary depending on the part of the body being treated, the amount of radiation and the type of radiation used, but most are minor. Usually, skin reactions develop about 3 weeks after radiation treatments start and go away within a few weeks after treatment ends.

In many patients, the skin over the treatment area becomes red, dry or irritated; in others, the skin looks tanned or bronzed. Some patients have a “moist” skin reaction, in which the skin is wet and may feel sore. This usually happens where the skin folds.

Skin reactions tend to be more noticeable in patients who have radiation therapy and chemotherapy at the same time. After a chemotherapy treatment, you may notice a skin reaction in the area where you are having radiation treatments. This is known as a “recall reaction” because the body is “recalling” an earlier treatment.

During radiation therapy treatment it is very important to avoid using any kind of cream, lotion, antiperspirant or deodorant that contains alcohol on the area that will be treated, because they are drying and can interfere with treatment. At the beginning of your treatment, check with your physician or radiation therapist about what kinds of skin products are best to use in the treatment area.

Skin reactions do not indicate that the cancer is spreading or that there is a problem with your treatment. However, it is important to tell your physician or radiation therapist if you notice a skin reaction, especially if there is blistering, swelling or tenderness. He or she can give you advice about how to care for your skin and minimize any itching or discomfort. In addition, follow these tips to protect and soothe the skin in the treatment area:

- Wear loose, soft, lightweight, cotton clothing over the treatment area. Women who are being treated for breast cancer should avoid bras that rub or chafe the skin.
- Avoid exposing the skin to extreme heat and cold. Do not use heating pads, hot water bottles or ice packs on the affected skin. Limit time outside in hot or cold weather.
- Keep baths and showers short, do not bathe more than once a day and use only lukewarm (not hot) water. Do not rub, scrub or massage the affected area. Pat the skin dry lightly, avoiding the treatment marks.
- Be extra careful about sun exposure: The skin in the treatment area will be permanently sensitized to the sun. Use a sunscreen with a sun protection factor (SPF) of at least 15 whenever you are outside for more than a few minutes.
- Do not use adhesive tape (such as band aids) on the treatment area.
- Check with your physician or radiation therapist about shaving the treatment area. You may be asked not to shave during radiation treatment, to use an electric razor, or to avoid using shaving creams or aftershave lotions.

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