

Side Effects from Radiation Therapy to the Skin

Radiation therapy to the skin is a treatment used to kill cancer cells in the skin. It is often used for sarcoma and lymphomas of the skin.

Side effects may happen because the high doses of radiation used to kill cancer can also damage healthy cells in the area around the treatment site. Side effects differ from person to person, ranging from none to severe.



This handout lists the most common side effects from radiation to the skin. It does not list all possible side effects.

Let your radiation doctor or nurse know if you have any side effects, whether mild or severe.

Early side effects

These early side effects may happen during treatment or within 3 months after:

- Dry, red or irritated skin. The skin may also peel, crust, ooze or become sore.
- Patchy hair loss in treated areas.
- Feeling tired or having low energy – called fatigue

Late side effects

These late side effects may show up months or even years after treatment:

- Dry skin – may need regular use of lotion
- Hair loss in the treated area may become permanent
- Small blood vessels might be easier to see in the skin
- Less sweating in the treatment site. This happens most often with total skin radiation.
- Small chance of getting a new cancer in the treated area – this is very rare

Basic skin care

- **Use only those lotions and skin products that your radiation team suggests.** Apply them in a thin layer. You don't need to remove them before treatment. It is ok to wear deodorant for your treatments.
- Wash your skin gently each day with lukewarm water and unscented soap like Dove or Neutrogena. If you have markings for your treatment, don't wash them off. Dry yourself with a soft towel by patting, not rubbing, your skin.
- Use an electric razor if you must shave the treatment area.
- Keep the area clean. For example, if your treatment area is on your leg, avoid activities like kneeling in dirt or gardening that might expose the area to bacteria.

Ways to protect your skin

- Avoid having your treatment area in the direct sun until your skin has fully healed.
- Wear loose clothes over the treatment site. Avoid scratching, rubbing or pressure on treated skin.
- Don't use heating pads, hot water bottles or sun lamps. Don't put ice or cold packs on your skin unless your radiation team tells you to do so.

Reasons to call your radiation doctor or nurse

- Blisters, sores or moist areas on your skin
- Questions or concerns about how your skin looks or feels

This info is a general resource. It is not meant to replace your doctor's advice. Ask your doctor or health care team any questions. Always follow their instructions.