



## RADIATION ONCOLOGY

# Caring for Your Skin during Radiation Therapy

When radiation treatment kills cancer cells, it can also cause side effects. Radiation can affect the skin in the area being treated. Typically, the skin begins to show irritation or redness from radiation after one or two weeks of treatment. However, some types of radiation do not cause skin changes at all. If skin changes or irritation does occur, the effects usually wear off within a few weeks after completing all the radiation treatments.

Each patient's body responds to radiation therapy in its own way. The amount of skin reaction you experience also depends on the type of treatment you need and the area of your body being treated. Your doctor might adjust your treatment schedule based on how well you tolerate the treatments. Therefore, one thing to remember during radiation therapy is to be extra kind to the skin in the treatment area. Below are some helpful hints to assist you.

- Try not to remove the colored marks from your skin, if present. These marks outline the area to be treated and must remain in place during your treatments. You may shower as long as you do not scrub off the marks.
- Avoid wearing tight clothes such as girdles or close-fitting collars over the treatment area. It is best to wear older garments that feel comfortable and that you can wash or throw away if the ink marks rub off on them. Soft, loose, cotton clothing tends to be most comfortable.
- Do not starch your clothes.
- Do not rub or scrub treated skin. After bathing or showering, pat your skin dry.
- Do not use any deodorant soaps, lotions, deodorants, medicine, perfumes, cosmetics, talcum powder, or other substances in the treated area without talking with your doctor or nurse first.
- Expect skin changes such as redness, dryness, peeling, and tanning. Itching and dryness may occur, but try not to scratch. You will receive specific instructions to help you. Please report any break in the skin to the doctor or nurse.
- Do not use adhesive tape on treated skin. If you need to use a bandage, use paper tape. Try to apply the tape outside of the treatment area.
- Do not apply heat or cold (heating pad, ice pack, etc.) to the treatment area. Even hot water can hurt your skin. Use only lukewarm water for bathing the treated area.
- Use an electric shaver if you must shave the area – but only after checking with your doctor or nurse. Do not use a pre-shave lotion or hair removal products. Be sure to look in the mirror while shaving. Your body hair in the treatment area may come out between 2 or 3 weeks after beginning treatments.

- Protect the treated area from the sun. If possible, cover treated skin (with light clothing or a hat) before going outside. Ask your doctor if you should use a lotion that contains a sunblock. Use a PABA sunscreen (sun protection factor of 15 or higher) or a sunblocking product even after your skin has healed following your treatment. Everyone should use sunscreen throughout their lives when they expect significant sun exposure.
- To help prevent or delay skin irritation, gently apply a lotion containing Vitamin E or Aloe to the skin in the treatment area. You should do this at least twice a day. Do not apply this lotion just before your daily treatment. Your doctor or nurse can provide you with samples of a skin care cream you can use. If you need samples, please ask.
- Be sure your doctor knows about any medicine you are taking before starting treatment. If you need to start taking any medicine, even aspirin, let your doctor know before you start. Some medicine can make your skin more sensitive to radiation.
- Ask your doctor, nurse, or radiation therapist any questions you have. They are the only ones who can properly advise you about your treatment, side effects, at-home care, and any other medical concerns you may have.

If you are receiving treatment to your brain:

- Wear sunscreen and a hat when out in the sun for a long period of time, especially if you are bald.
- Wash your hair with a gentle shampoo, like Johnson's Baby Shampoo™. Not washing your hair as frequently will help to prevent excessive drying.
- It is not recommended that you have your hair colored or permed while receiving radiation to the head.
- Your scalp may tingle and itch at times. This is normal and there is no treatment for it.
- Scalp dryness and flaking may occur. This is not easily treated unless you have hair loss.
- If you have bald areas, you can apply a lotion containing vitamin E or aloe to the area at least twice a day to help with the symptoms mentioned above. Avoid lotions with perfumes. The nurses can suggest particular lotions for your use.

#### References:

- Dow, K. H., Bucholtz, J. D., Iwamoto, R., Fieler, V., and Hilderley, L. Nursing Care in Radiation Oncology. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Second Edition 1997.
- Aspen Publishers, Inc. Oncology Patient Education Manual. Gaithersburg, Maryland: First Edition 1994-2000.