



Patient information

SKIN CARE DURING EXTERNAL RADIATION THERAPY

Oncology

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The following document includes information about:

- What a skin reaction from external radiation therapy (radiodermatitis) is;
- How to take care of your skin during therapy;
- What to do if you have a skin reaction;
- How to do saline soaks.

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What is radiodermatitis?

External radiation therapy can cause skin changes. One of these changes appears a bit like a sunburn. It is known as radiodermatitis.

It appears slowly in the area being treated. This is a normal reaction to radiation therapy.

Your care team (nurse, physician, radiation therapist) will show you the area of your body that may be affected. They will also explain what you can expect.

Why is it important to take care of my skin?

Taking care of your skin during radiation therapy will:

- Help minimize skin changes;
- Help reduce any irritation (for mild reactions);
- Help reduce the risk of infection (for more severe reactions);
- Help your skin recover after radiation therapy.

You cannot prevent a skin reaction. To minimize a skin reaction:

- Be gentle with your skin;
- Keep your skin clean and moisturized;
- Protect your skin from the sun's rays and extreme temperatures (too warm or too cold).

You do not need to use any products on your skin if there are no changes. You can apply a moisturizer regularly.

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General rules

- Use gentle soap or shampoo only. Pat your skin dry with a soft towel.
- Do not use cosmetics or perfumed products on the area being treated.
- Do not use powder or talc (baby powder).
- Wear soft, loose-fitting clothing (e.g., cotton or silk).
- Protect your skin from the sun and cold.
- Do not use any adhesive or tape on the treated area.
- Do not use a heat pad or ice pack on the treated area.
- Use an electric razor if you must shave.
- Do not remove the hair from the treated area.
- Avoid chlorinated pools, saunas or whirlpool baths.
- If you go swimming, be careful not to erase the markings when drying yourself.
- Follow this advice up to 6 weeks after your radiation therapy is over.

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How do I wash my skin in the treatment area?

It is important to keep your treated skin clean to prevent infection. Here is how to wash your skin:

- Wash your skin gently using lukewarm water only.
- Use mild unscented soap such as Dove.
- Use a soft towel to pat your skin dry; avoid rubbing your skin.
- **The marks must remain on your skin.** Wash the area gently, making sure not to erase them.

Can I use moisturizing cream on my skin in the treatment area?

You can use moisturizing cream on your skin. You may apply it twice a day. Here is how:

- Choose a water-based, unscented moisturizing cream.
- Wash your hands before applying cream.
- **Do not use an aloe-, flaxseed oil- or petroleum jelly- (Vaseline) based cream.**
- Use a water-based cream (e.g., Glaxal Base, Lubriderm).
- Do not apply cream 1 hour before your next treatment.

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Can I use an antiperspirant or deodorant?

You can use these products in the treatment area if your skin is not open or flaky. Use an unscented deodorant, as it will be less likely to irritate your skin.

Can I shave my skin in the treatment area?

You can shave your skin in the treatment area. Here is how:

- Use an electric razor.
- Do not use a bladed razor.
- Do not use shaving cream.
- Do not use after-shave.
- Do not use lotions with alcohol.

What do I do if my skin is irritated?

If your skin becomes irritated, you may notice or experience some of the following:

- Redness;
- Dryness;
- Burning sensation;
- Itching;
- Swelling;
- Skin feeling tight.

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Here is what you should do if your skin becomes irritated:

- Use an unscented moisturizing cream or lotion.
- Apply it to the irritated area twice a day or more often.
- Continue washing the area as usual.
- Tell your care team if your skin continues to itch. The physician can prescribe a cream.

What do I do if my skin is dry and flaky?

If your skin is dry and flaky, you may notice or experience some of the following:

- Itching;
- Redness;
- Sensitive skin;
- Less perspiration in the region.

Here is what you should do if your skin is dry and flaky:

- Let the skin peel off by itself. **Do not peel off loose skin.**
- Use an unscented moisturizing cream or lotion.
- Apply it to the irritated area twice a day or more often.
- Tell your care team if your skin continues to itch. The physician can prescribe a cream.
- Do a saline soak (page 10).

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What do I do if my skin is open and moist?

If your skin is open and moist, you may notice or experience some of the following:

- Flaky skin;
- Open skin;
- Moist skin;
- Drainage or weeping (oozing) from the area;
- Discomfort or pain in the area.

The radiation therapy nurse can check your skin and apply a dressing. She can also help you with medicated cream and discomfort and pain medicine.

Here is what you should do if your skin is open and moist:

- **Stop using moisturizing cream on the part of your skin that is open and moist.**
- Continue using moisturizing cream on the part of your skin that is not open or moist.
- Do a saline soak (page 10).
- Wash the affected region gently without rubbing.
- Use the protective cream recommended by your care team.
- Apply the medicated cream prescribed by your radiation oncologist.
- Do not go swimming.

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What do I do if my skin is bleeding, blistered or appears to be infected?

See a nurse if your skin is bleeding, blistered or appears to be infected (redness, pain, drainage, swelling, fever). **Do not try to treat this reaction on your own.**

What is a saline soak?

A saline soak is used to bathe skin affected by radiation therapy. It can also help you feel more comfortable. A saline soak can help reduce redness, swelling, irritation and itching.

You can buy saline solution at any drugstore. Only use 0.9% saline. If you buy sterile saline, it is ready for use.

Do not use saline solution that is made for contact lenses, as it contains other products.

You can also make your own **sterile saline** at home. You will need:

- A clean pot;
- A clean jar with a lid;
- Table salt.

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Instructions:

1. Pour 4 cups of tap water into the pot. Add 2 teaspoons of salt to the water.
2. Bring the water to a boil and boil for 5 minutes. When the salt is dissolved, remove the pot from the heat and allow to cool.
3. Pour the cooled solution into the jar. Cover with a lid.
4. Write the date on the jar.
5. Keep the jar on the counter.
6. Throw away any unused saline after 2 days.

How do I do a saline soak?

You will need:

- Sterile saline (from the drugstore or homemade);
- A clean, soft cloth (thick facecloth);
- A clean bowl.

Instructions:

1. Wash your hands.
2. Put the clean, soft cloth in the bowl.
3. Pour the saline solution over the cloth.
4. Gently squeeze the cloth to wring out extra liquid.
5. Place the cloth over the affected area for 5 to 10 minutes. Do not leave the cloth on longer. **Do not scrub the area.**
6. Remove the cloth and let the skin air-dry for 1 to 2 minutes.
7. Repeat these steps for any other affected area. Wash your hands and use a clean bowl and new cloth each time.
8. Soaks can be done 3 to 4 times a day or more often. They can be done until your skin is healed.
9. If you have a prescribed cream, apply it once your skin is dry.

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How do I care for my skin after radiation therapy?

It is important for you to care for your skin by following advice provided in this guide until your skin has completely healed.

Radiodermatitis usually improves 2 to 3 weeks after radiation therapy.

Skin colour usually returns to normal 3 to 4 weeks after treatment.

You can continue to follow skin care advice for 6 weeks after treatment.

Your skin will still be sensitive after it is healed.

After your skin has healed:

- Be gentle with the skin that was affected.
- Use moisturizing cream once daily.
- Avoid exposing your skin to sunlight or cold.
- Apply sunscreen (SPF of 30 or higher) if you go out in the sun. Reapply often.