



Provincial Health Services Authority

Care of Radiation Therapy Side Effects: Skin Care

If you are having external radiation therapy, a skin reaction in the treated area is possible. Talk to your BC Cancer health care team about whether this might happen to you.

The skin in the treated area may become warm, dry or itchy. It may change colour (become pink, red, darker or tanned looking) and you may lose hair in the treated area.

Most skin reactions begin within the first week or so of starting treatment, but timing can be different for each person. Some people do not have a skin reaction until after their radiation treatment is finished.

Skin reactions usually go away a few weeks after your final treatment. Some skin changes, like skin darkening or scarring, can be permanent (they will never go away).

Here are some tips to protect your skin and help it feel better:

Lifestyle and well-being

- Be very gentle with the skin in the treated area.
- Wear loose, comfortable clothing.
- Protect the treated skin from wind and direct sunlight. If you cannot cover the area, use sunscreen with an SPF of 30 or higher.
- It is okay to swim as long as your skin is not broken or irritated. It is best to shower right away after swimming: gently wash off the chlorine, pat dry and apply moisturizer.

Hygiene and moisturizing

- Keep your skin moisturized to prevent dryness. There is no evidence that any one cream or product is better for this than another. If you like a certain product or brand, continue to use it.
- If you do not have a moisturizer, use one that is water-based (water or aqua is the first ingredient on the list).
- Once you start your radiation treatment, use the moisturizer many times each day.
- You can use deodorants and anti-perspirants.

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- When you bathe or shower, use warm water (not hot) and pat dry with a soft towel.
- Use an electric razor if you want to shave.
- If your head or scalp is being treated, you can use your normal shampoo but wash gently.
- If you have a skin reaction, your BC Cancer health care team may ask you to use a steroid-based cream or antibiotic on the treated area.

'Do Nots' for the treatment area

- Do not use perfume, alcohol, astringents, or adhesives on the treated skin.
- Avoid extremes of hot or cold (heating pads, ice packs, saunas, etc.).
- Do not use hot tubs or Jacuzzis®.
- Do not rub, scratch, or massage the treated skin.

If you have any questions or concerns, please talk to your BC Cancer health care team