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# **Skin care guidelines for patients receiving radiotherapy**

*This leaflet describes the skin reactions that may develop during your course of radiotherapy treatment and provides advice on how to look after your skin during treatment. The side effects from radiotherapy are localised so only the skin in the area receiving radiation will be affected.*



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Skin changes are common and expected during radiotherapy as the radiation makes skin more sensitive. The team will monitor your skin very closely during your treatment and will give you advice on how to minimise these reactions and manage them appropriately. Please inform the team if you have an existing skin condition as they may need to advise you accordingly.

Radiotherapy skin reactions usually start to develop in the second week of treatment. The first signs of skin reaction are a mild reddening, sensitivity, itching or warmth in the area being treated. This is called erythema and can be helped by using a simple, non-perfumed moisturiser.

### **What can affect my skin reaction?**

Your radiotherapy skin reaction can be more noticeable if:

- You are having chemotherapy alongside radiotherapy
- You smoke – if you need help to stop please ask for advice
- Your breast area or armpits are in the area receiving radiotherapy treatment

Your treatment team will talk to you about your usual daily skin care routine. They will let you know if any changes are advised.

Please talk to them about any worries you have.

### **What are the signs of a radiation skin reaction?**

You may notice in the treated area:

- Your skin gradually becoming pinker or darker, depending on your skin colour
- The skin may feel dry or tight, and sore
- A rash may also appear and feel itchy
- Sometimes the skin may need specialised dressing

If you do develop a skin reaction, please speak to the team so you can have further advice.

Please note, silver-containing dressings and creams are not recommended whilst radiotherapy is still being delivered but can be used after treatment is complete.

Do not apply any patches to the treated area, including pain patches or any sticky tape on the area (such as Elastoplast or Micropore)

### **General washing and skin care advice**

- It is important to keep the area clean when having radiotherapy.
- You may bath and shower as normal but use warm water rather than hot and avoid soaking the area for long periods. Be gentle with the skin having treatment and do not use a washcloth or anything similar.
- You can continue to use your normal shower/bath products but if your skin becomes irritated it is advisable to stop using that product and ask the team for advice.



- Pat the area dry with a soft towel or let the skin dry naturally. Be careful to pay extra attention to skin folds such as those under the breast.

The skin will become more sensitive during radiotherapy. It is not advisable to put hot water bottles or cooled cream or packs on the skin receiving treatment.

If you are not experiencing any skin reactions you can swim in a chlorinated pool. However, be sure to rinse off the chlorine after getting out of the pool and to moisturise the area to avoid the skin becoming dry.

### **Moisturising**

You may continue to use your normal moisturiser during treatment. You do not need to change from this unless it starts to irritate your skin during treatment. Using a moisturiser/emollient can help if the area is dry and itchy. Apply thinly, gently smooth it on and let it be absorbed, do not rub it in. Sodium lauryl sulphate (SLS), which is found in certain personal care products, can irritate the skin. It's best to avoid creams and products containing it. Do not scratch your skin if it is itchy and if your skin breaks/blisters you should stop using a moisturiser.

### **Deodorants and talcum powder**

At this point it is advisable to change to a product with no oils or metals.

### **Perfumes and make up**

Avoid using perfumes or make up in the area being treated as they often contain alcohol and this may make your skin sore.

### **Shaving and hair removal**

Avoid hair removal in the area being treated as this will make the skin sore. You should change to an electric razor if you want to continue shaving.

### **Clothing**

Any irritation or friction in the area being treated can worsen a skin reaction so it is advisable to wear loose fitting clothing made of natural fibre, next to the skin that is receiving treatment. The aim is to promote air circulation and avoid the skin being rubbed and irritated by clothing: If you are having radiotherapy to the breast – wear a cotton non-underwired bra and change to cotton prosthesis or use a cotton handkerchief between skin and prosthesis



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## **Sun exposure**

Avoid sun exposures to the area being treated by keeping the area covered or shaded from the sun. Please do not use sun cream on the area being treated during your course of treatment.

The use of sunbeds is not advisable.

## **What happens when treatment has finished?**

Symptoms often persist or worsen after treatment has finished. It is usually 7-10 days after completion of treatment that reactions are at their peak. Most patients find their skin has healed by about 4 weeks after treatment finishes. If the skin has broken, healing may take longer than this. Continue with your skin care routine until your skin has returned to normal.