

Hair, Skin and Nails Potential Changes with Chemotherapy

Side effects such as hair loss, changes in skin color or texture or cracked, brittle nails may occur during chemotherapy (chemo). Some chemo medicines may cause these changes, others do not. If you have any of these side effects, talk with your health care team.

Hair Loss or Thinning

Hair loss (known as alopecia) can occur on any part of the body. This includes the head, face, arms, legs, underarms or pubic area. It may involve mild thinning or complete hair loss. Hair loss does not normally happen right away. It can start from 2 to 4 weeks after chemo begins. Hair loss is usually temporary. Hair can grow back a different color or texture after chemo is done. It can also return to its original appearance.

If you have hair loss, keep your scalp clean and moisturized to prevent breaks or cuts in your skin. Use sunscreen or sun block, a hat, scarf or wig to protect your scalp from the sun and weather. To help manage hair loss due to chemotherapy, scalp cooling may be an option for you. Ask your care team about scalp cooling or view the **Scalp Cooling: Overview** patient education document in MyChart.

Other tips:

- Use mild shampoos and soft hairbrushes.
- Do not overheat your hair with blow dryers, irons or hot rollers. If you must use these, try the lowest heat setting.
- Pat hair dry.
- Consider a shorter hairstyle. Shorter hair often appears thicker and fuller.
- Talk with your health care team if you are interested in getting a custom wig. It may be covered by your health insurance policy.

Skin Changes

- **Dry skin**
 - Bathe or shower in lukewarm water. Avoid long, hot showers and bubble baths.
 - Use mild soaps without perfume or fragrance. Consider a moisturizing body wash.
 - Pat yourself dry instead of rubbing.
 - Keep your skin moisturized. Use hypoallergenic creams without fragrance after you bathe or shower. Examples include Eucerin[®], CeraVe[®], Vanicream[®] or Aquaphor[®].
 - Do not use perfume, cologne or aftershave lotion. These products often contain alcohol which dries and irritates skin.
 - Drink enough fluids so that your urine is light colored or clear. This means your body has enough fluid.

- **Sensitivity to sunlight**
 - You may get sunburned more easily. The sun may also cause a skin rash.
 - Avoid long exposure to sunlight. **Do not** use sunlamps or tanning beds.
 - Use a PABA-free sunscreen (SPF 30 or greater) and lip balm, no matter your skin tone. You may need to avoid direct sunlight completely.
 - Wear sun-protective clothing such as a long-sleeved shirt, hat, sunglasses and pants when outside.
- **Skin rash or itching**
 - Report any rash, blisters, itching, redness or peeling to your doctor or nurse **right away**.
 - Ask for medicines to relieve itching.
 - Bathe or shower with gentle, fragrance-free body washes such as Dove® or Oil of Olay®.
 - Wear loose-fitting clothing.
- **Acne**
 - Talk with your doctor about over-the-counter or prescription medicines that may help.

Nail Changes

Changes in fingernails or toenails may occur from chemo. Your nails may darken or develop white streaks or ridges. They may become brittle, dry and cracked. Nails may lift up from the nail bed. These changes are temporary and will take time to grow out.

Protect your hands and feet if these changes occur. If you do not, the chance of infection and nail loss increases. Try these tips for healthy nails:

- Gently trim or file nails. **Do not** cut nails too close to the nail bed.
- **Do not** use nail-strengthening products. They may irritate your skin or nails.
- **Do not** get professional manicures or pedicures unless your health care team says it is OK.
- Talk with your health care team about artificial nails. They may cause fungal infections. They may also mask nail changes caused by cancer treatment.
- Use unscented lotions and creams to keep your nails and cuticles healthy.
- Wear gloves while working around the house or yard.
- Tell your health care team about redness, pain or other changes around your cuticles. If you have these symptoms, ask for copy of the **Paronychia Skin Infection** patient education document or view it in MyChart.

Resource

Visit the American Cancer Society:
https://bit.ly/ACS_ChemoSideEffects