

Radiation Treatment Care for Head and Neck Skin Reactions

Skin reactions from radiation treatment often appear about 3 weeks after receiving radiation. Common skin reactions include:

- Redness
- Itching or discomfort
- Dry, flaky skin (dry reaction)
- Open, weeping skin (moist reaction)

Report any unexpected symptoms to your doctor or nurse.

Your radiation nurse will give you instructions on how to care for your skin. This will include using one or more creams or ointments. We recommend moisturizers free of alcohol or perfumes.

Prescription ointments may be needed if your skin worsens. If this happens, talk with your doctor about other options.

Applying Skin Ointment and Cream

On the first day of your radiation treatment, apply the ointment or cream that your doctor prescribed to the skin in the treated area.

1. Apply the ointment or cream in a thin layer 3-5 times a day. Keeping the skin moist can help lessen the severity of radiation skin damage.
2. **Do not** apply the prescribed ointment or cream over any markings that the therapist may have drawn on your skin.
3. It is important to wash your hands before and after performing all skin care.
4. When all of your treatments are complete, continue to apply ointment or cream to the skin until it is completely healed. Skin usually heals in 2-4 weeks.

Although uncommon, some patients have a reaction to creams or ointments, where the skin becomes very red or itches. Contact your nurse or doctor if this happens to you.

If your skin becomes very raw or moist and weeps, your radiation nurse will give you instructions for skin care. These may include the following:

- Your doctor may prescribe a different ointment.
- Your nurse may tell you how to use an astringent to help clean the skin.
- Your doctor may prescribe a wound dressing.

Bathing

Bathe or shower in warm water using mild soap such as Ivory[®] or Dove[®]. Avoid deodorant soaps, they may irritate the skin. Use your hands, not a washcloth on the treated skin. Do not soak the treated area in a bathtub for any period of time until your skin has fully healed and/or your doctor has told you that is okay.

Shaving (Men)

You may use an electric shaver, but check with your doctor or nurse before shaving any part of your treatment area. Do not use pre-shave or after-shave lotions. These lotions contain alcohol and will irritate your skin.

Resources

National Cancer Institute (NCI)

Radiation Therapy Website

<http://www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/treatment/types/radiation-therapy>

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