



Skin Care Guidelines for Patients Receiving Radiotherapy

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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.

Skin reactions are normal and expected during radiotherapy as the radiation makes your skin more sensitive. The radiographers will monitor your skin very closely during your treatment and will give you advice on how to minimise and manage these changes appropriately.

Radiotherapy reactions are usually at their peak seven to ten days after completion of treatment and most patients find their skin has healed by about four weeks after treatment is finished.

We suggest you to continue to follow the skin care advice the radiographers give you after treatment has finished until your skin has returned to normal.

Please tell the radiographers if you have an existing skin condition as they may need to advise you accordingly.

What are the signs of a radiation skin reaction?

You may notice in the treated area:

- Your skin gradually becoming pink, red or darker, depending on your skin colour
- The skin may feel dry, tight, or sore
- The skin may feel itchy and a rash may appear
- The skin may blister or peel – If this happens you will be given further advice by the radiographers and you may be given specialised dressings or creams to use

If you do develop a skin reaction, please speak to a radiographer who will be able to give you further advice if required.

What can affect my skin reaction?

Your radiotherapy skin reaction may be more noticeable if:

- You are having chemotherapy alongside radiotherapy
- You are receiving radiotherapy treatment to areas such as the breast, armpits, groin, genitals, buttocks or limbs where there are folds of skin that are warm, moist or may rub together. (This can cause friction and an increase in skin sensitivity)
- You expose the area being treated to the sun during treatment as this will further increase the sensitivity on the skin (head, neck and limbs). Please try and keep the area covered but do not use sun cream in the areas being treated
- You smoke – if you need help to stop, please ask for advice

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 concerns you have about skin care and radiotherapy.

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.

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 radiographers for advice.

Be gentle with the skin having treatment and do not use a washcloth or anything similar, as this can cause friction on the skin.

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 arm, breast, groin or buttocks.

Moisturising

Using a moisturiser/emollient can help prevent the area becoming dry and itchy.

You may continue to use your normal moisturiser during treatment but if you are choosing a new moisturiser we would recommend one that is sodium lauryl sulphate-free (SLS free).

- Apply the moisturiser thinly, gently smooth it on and let it be absorbed - do not rub it in
- Try not scratch your skin if it is itchy as this will further irritate the skin
- If your skin breaks or blisters you should stop using your moisturiser and inform the radiographers. The radiographers will then advise you accordingly

Please do not use sun cream or after-sun as a moisturiser during treatment.

Deodorants

You can continue to use your usual deodorant unless the skin becomes sore.

At this point if you wish to continue to use deodorant it is advisable to change to a product with no oils or metals, such as:

- Bionsen
- Pitrok Natural
- Alra Naturally Fresh – crystal roll on
- Forever Living Aloe Ever Shield
- Crystal Body deodorant stick

Hair washing

If you are having the brain, head or neck treated you may wash your hair with your normal shampoo but wash your hair gently. Pat the hair dry and do not use a hairdryer or if you do, only use it on the coolest setting.

Swimming

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

Perfumes and aftershave

Avoid using perfumes, aftershave or makeup in the areas being treated as they often contain alcohol and this may make your skin sore.

Shaving and hair removal

It is advisable to avoid shaving and hair removal products such as waxes or hair removal creams within the area being treated as this will cause further irritation and sensitivity on the skin.

If you wish to continue shaving then you should change to an electric razor as this is less abrasive on the skin than wet shaving.

Clothing

Any irritation or friction on the skin in the area being treated can worsen a skin reaction. It is advisable to wear loose-fitting clothing made of natural fibre such as cotton, 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.

Some suggestions:

- If you are having radiotherapy to the breast – wear a cotton, non-underwired bra and, if you can, change to a cotton prosthesis or use a cotton handkerchief between your skin and prosthesis
- If you are having radiotherapy to the head and neck, avoid wearing clothes with a collar to reduce skin irritation or wear a silk cravat or scarf between the skin and the collar
- If you are having radiotherapy to the abdomen and pelvis, avoid wearing tight waistbands, tights and tight underwear

Extremes of temperature

As the skin will become more sensitive during radiotherapy it is not advisable to put hot water bottles or ice packs on/against the skin in

the area receiving treatment as this will cause further irritation to the skin in the area being treated.

Sun exposure

During treatment, avoid sun exposure to the area being treated by keeping the area covered or shaded from the sun. Please do not use sun cream or after-sun on the area being treated during your course of treatment.

Please avoid using fake tans in the area being treated as these can cause irritation to the skin and can also prevent the radiographers from assessing any skin changes during treatment.

The use of sunbeds is not advisable.

What happens when treatment has finished?

Radiotherapy reactions are usually at their peak seven to ten days after completion of treatment. Symptoms often persist or may seem to worsen after treatment has finished. This is quite normal.

We advise you to continue to follow the skin care advice given to you by the radiographers after treatment has finished until your skin has returned to normal.

If you have any concerns regarding your skin reaction after radiotherapy has finished, please feel free to contact the Review Radiographers on **0121 371 3553 (Monday to Friday 09:00 - 17:00)** for advice.

Most patients find their skin has healed by about four weeks after treatment finishes. If the skin has broken or blistered during/after treatment then healing may take longer than this.

If you have required any dressings during treatment you may need to see a district nurse for a short time after treatment has finished. This can be arranged by your GP.

Your skin will always be more sensitive to the sun in the area treated. You will need to be careful in the sun for at least a year after treatment has finished.

Avoid exposing the area you have had treated to strong, direct sunlight, use a sun cream with a minimum UVB sun protection factor (SPF) of 50 with UVA protection or keep the skin covered.

Radiotherapy contact numbers

Treatment Review Radiographer – 0121 371 3553

Head and Neck Radiographer – 0121 371 3547

Lung Radiographer – 0121 371 3554

HDR Radiographer – 0121 371 3535

Radiotherapy reception – 0121 371 5081

Please leave an answer phone message with your name and telephone number if your call is not answered. Your call will be returned as soon as possible.

Patrick Room – Cancer Centre, Queen Elizabeth Hospital Birmingham

Information and support for people with cancer and their families.

Tel: 0121 371 3537/9

Acute Oncology Team

Available to patients up to six weeks after treatment finishes:

Tel: 07789 651543

Please contact this number if you develop urgent medical problems with symptoms including:

- High temperature of 38°C (100°F) or above
- Shivering, uncontrollable shaking or flu-like symptoms
- Mouth ulcers that stop you eating or drinking
- Persistent vomiting and diarrhoea (more than four times a day)
- Difficulty breathing



The Trust provides free monthly health talks on a variety of medical conditions and treatments. For more information visit www.uhb.nhs.uk/health-talks.htm or call 0121 371 4323.

Radiotherapy

Queen Elizabeth Hospital Birmingham
Mindelsohn Way, Edgbaston
Birmingham, B15 2GW
Telephone: 0121 627 2000