



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 10–14 days after completion of treatment and most patients find their skin has healed by 4–6 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.

How might my skin react to treatment?

During your radiotherapy you may develop a skin reaction in the area being treated. You may notice any of the following:

- Your skin gradually becoming pinker or darker, depending on your skin colour
- The skin may feel dry, tight or sore
- A rash may appear and feel itchy and this may feel worse when you get warm or hot

- Sometimes the skin may blister or peel. If this happens, tell your radiographers, you will be given further advice and may need specialist dressings or creams to be provided

A skin reaction may appear at any time but usually begins about 10 days after starting treatment. It is usual for any skin reactions during treatment to last for a few weeks after treatment.

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 make my skin reaction worse?

There are a number of factors that may affect the severity of your skin reaction, should one develop. For example:

- Having treatment to areas where there are skin folds (breast, armpits, groins, buttocks) can make your skin reaction worse because they can be warm, moist and rub together causing friction on the skin, thus making the skin more sensitive.
- Having chemotherapy and/or immunotherapy alongside radiotherapy (due to their combined effects)
- If you are prescribed a higher dose of radiation for your cancer type
- If you expose the area being treated to the sun during treatment this will further increase the sensitivity on the skin and can make the skin reaction from treatment worse. Please try and keep the area covered but do not use sun cream in the areas being treated
- Smoking can make your skin reaction worse – if you need help to stop or cut down on smoking then please ask for advice
- If you have any other conditions such as diabetes, heart disease and other skin conditions (as these may affect the overall condition of your skin)

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.

It may not be possible to stop a radiotherapy skin reaction but by following the advice below you may feel more comfortable.

General washing and skin care advice

This only applies to the skin in the area being treated:

- The skin may become more sensitive during radiotherapy and it is important to keep the area clean when having treatment
- 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 washing the skin and do not use a washcloth or anything similar as this increases 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 gently drying skin folds such as those under the arm, breast, groin or buttocks.

Moisturising

- Moisturising your skin can help keep the skin in good condition and help to keep it supple
- Moisturising will also prevent the skin from becoming dry and itchy during radiotherapy
- You may use your normal moisturiser. Use it frequently and gently smooth it into your skin and avoid rubbing the skin
- If you do not currently use a moisturiser, speak with the radiographers who give you your treatment and they will be able to suggest a few options for you
- Apply the moisturiser thinly, gently smooth it on and let it be absorbed - do not rub it in
- You do not need to wipe your moisturiser off before receiving treatment, but please do not apply moisturiser immediately before your treatment
- Try not scratch your skin if it is itchy as this will further irritate the skin

- If your skin breaks, blisters or peels, stop using moisturiser. Inform your treatment team and they will advise you further
- Please do not use sun cream or after-sun as a moisturiser during treatment.

Deodorants

- You can continue to use the deodorant you normally use.
- If the skin becomes irritated then please stop.

Hair care

- 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 your skin is not sore, blistered or peeling, you may continue to go swimming
- It is best to shower immediately after swimming to wash off the chlorine and to moisturise the skin afterwards to avoid the skin becoming dry
- Please stop swimming if it irritates your skin

Shaving and hair removal

- It is advisable to avoid shaving and using wax, creams or lasers for hair removal 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

Other products

- Avoid using perfumes, aftershave, makeup and hair dyes on, or close to the areas being treated as this may worsen your skin reaction.
- Do not use sticky tape on the area treated (such as Elastoplast™ or Micropore™)

Clothing

- You may find it more comfortable to wear loose-fitting clothing made of natural fibre such as cotton or silk, 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
- Continue to protect the treated area from the sun for at least one year after you have finished treatment. Because your skin will be more sensitive, use sunscreen with SPF 50 (sun protection factor) in the future

What happens when treatment has finished?

- Radiotherapy reactions are usually at their peak 10 to 14 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 no longer feels sensitive.
- 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 that you cannot apply yourself, you may need to see a district nurse for a short time after treatment has finished. This can be arranged by your GP

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.

Radiotherapy contact numbers

Treatment Review Radiographers – **0121 371 3553** – for advice on treatment side effects and skin care.

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

If you require this information in another format, such as a different language, large print, braille or audio version please ask a member of staff or email **patientexperience@uhb.nhs.uk**.

Radiotherapy

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