

Skin Care During and After Radiation Treatment for Breast Cancer

Radiation treatment causes side effects to your skin that are similar to those caused by sun damage. Common side effects include dryness, mild redness or tanning, noticeable redness or tanning and sometimes blistering.

Although every patient is different, side effects usually occur about one-quarter of the way through treatment. Side effects are usually not related to your tendency to sunburn. The information below will help you care for your skin. Follow these directions, unless otherwise directed by your doctor.

General Skin Care

Do not begin a skin care routine or use products unless your doctor recommends or approves it.

Aquaphor® is often recommended to patients for general skin care. (Your health care team will give you a sample and a coupon for Aquaphor). If your skin becomes dry or itches and your doctor approves, apply the product to the treatment areas after radiation. Do not apply the product to the treatment marking lines. It is important to not have thick creams on the skin at the time of treatment.

Pure aloe gel (alcohol free) may also be used as above.

If the Aquaphor does not relieve itching, over-the-counter hydrocortisone cream can help. Apply the hydrocortisone cream first and then the Aquaphor.

If skin appears very sunburned (red or tan), your team may give you non-adherent medicated dressings to place over the affected areas. A member of your medical team will show you how to apply these.

Avoid harsh soaps that have a lot of fragrance. Instead, use fragrance-free soaps with moisturizers, such as Dove®.

Help prevent skin irritation by avoiding tight clothes or underwire bras, especially once you begin to have symptoms.

If these suggestions do not relieve symptoms, your medical team will discuss alternatives during your weekly doctor visit.

Treatment Marking Lines

Treatment lines will be drawn on your skin to ensure that the radiation is aimed at the same area during each treatment. The marking ink will stain, so you may want to wear old clothing or wear something between the marks and your good clothing. The marks may be redrawn by the therapist if they fade. When using skin care products, be careful to not rub off the lines.

When showering, let the water run over the treatment lines instead of falling directly on the marks. This will help prevent the lines from washing off. If skin is sensitive, use warm rather than hot water in the shower.

Skin-On-Skin Contact

To help prevent redness and skin irritation, avoid skin-on-skin contact.

This typically happens:

- At the point where your arm presses against your armpit and the outer portion of your breast.
- Along the bottom crease of your breast, where it touches your upper belly wall.
- Along your cleavage.

To avoid skin-on-skin contact:

- Try to keep your arm from touching the body whenever possible.
- Wear a sturdy bra without an underwire to keep your breasts separated and lifted.
- For large-breasted women, place a soft washcloth or piece of soft cotton or flannel under your breast when not wearing a bra. Your medical team may give you non-adherent dressings to help with this.

Dusting the breast area and inside skin folds with cornstarch helps to absorb moisture, reduce friction and keep you smelling fresh. Use baby powder made from cornstarch or sifted kitchen cornstarch (don't use talc). Apply it with a clean makeup brush or put some cornstarch into a single knee-high nylon or thin sock and knot it at the top. Gently tap the sock against the skin to dust the surface. If your doctor recommends using creams or salves, apply those first and then dust the area with the cornstarch.

After Treatment

After your radiation treatment is complete, the skin that has been exposed to radiation may be more sensitive to the sun. You can go out in the sun and have fun, but continue to protect your skin.

Follow these guidelines:

- Use a sunblock that is rated SPF 50 or higher on the treated area. SPF 30 absorbs about 97 percent of the sun's burning rays, while SPF 50 absorbs about 98 percent. No sunscreen or SPF will completely protect you from the sun.
- Apply the sunblock 30 minutes before you go out in the sun.
- Once you're outdoors, reapply the sunscreen every two hours or more often if you're swimming or sweating.

The treated skin will always be drier than it was before. After your symptoms have improved, moisturize everyday with the moisturizer of your choice. This will help reduce permanent tan lines and may make reconstruction easier for your surgeon.