

Arden Cancer Centre

Radiotherapy treatment - skin care advice for patients

This information is for patients receiving radiotherapy treatment at the Arden Cancer Centre. During your radiotherapy, your skin in the treatment area may become red and itchy, and in some cases moist patches may develop, which can be quite sore. This can occur from the second week of treatment and be worse at the end and for 1 to 2 weeks after completion of treatment. Skin reactions may last for 3 to 4 weeks after treatment has been completed.

It is difficult to know which patients will be most affected, but there are some factors which can increase the likelihood of your skin becoming sore.

These include:

- Treating areas where there is a natural skin fold such as the neck, armpit, breast, groins and between the buttocks.
- Smoking whilst on treatment
- Skin type (very pale and dark skin can react more severely)
- Type of treatment given
- Patients also on chemotherapy or targeted therapies
- Poor hygiene
- Poor diet / nutrition
- Exposure to extremes in temperature
- Friction from tight clothing



Patient Information

- Other medical conditions such as diabetes or cardiovascular disease
- Obesity
- Infection

It is recommended that you:

- Wash the treated area daily with your usual soap or shower gel and pat your skin dry with a soft towel.
- Apply moisturiser to the treatment area 2 or 3 times a day. Gently smooth it onto your skin until it is absorbed. Do not apply just before your treatment.
- If you do not normally use moisturiser, this can be bought over the counter. If needed, ask your GP. Otherwise, discuss this with your treatment radiographers at the start of your radiotherapy.
- Drink 6 to 8 glasses of water daily to keep you hydrated, and eat a nutritionally well-balanced diet.
- Continue to use deodorants if desired, unless they are found to irritate the skin, or the skin is broken.
- Wear loose-fitting clothing next to the skin (cotton is a good natural fibre).
- Avoid any perfumes, aftershaves, make-up, hair dye or other creams in the treated area.
- Avoid the use of sun lamps, spray tans or skin colouring lotions.
- Avoid using hot water bottles or ice packs in the treatment area.
- Keep the treated area out of the sun during treatment and care should be taken in the future by using a factor 50 sun cream
- Avoid shaving in the area being treated (if you must shave, use an electric razor for dry shaving only. When the skin becomes visibly red, stop shaving). No wet shaving, hair removal creams, lasers or wax should be used.
- If treating the head / scalp, wash your hair gently with shampoo but avoid using a hairdryer.
- Avoid using sticky tape in the treatment area such as Elastoplast or Micropore.

Patient Information

Swimming

You may continue to swim if your skin is not blistered or peeling, providing that you wash the treatment area before and afterwards and apply moisturiser.

Care should be taken as chlorinated water can have a drying effect on the skin. Do not swim if you have an infection or your skin is irritated.

What to expect

The side effects of radiotherapy on the skin may continue for 2 to 3 weeks after your treatment has finished. During this time your skin may:

- Gradually become pinker or darker
- Feel dry or tight and sore
- Develop a rash and feel itchy
- Become broken, blister, peel, and weep (moist desquamation)

How you can help

- Start using moisturiser when your radiotherapy begins
- If you feel the moisturiser is irritating your skin, stop using it and speak to your treatment radiographer
- Continue to apply moisturiser, especially when your skin becomes red or sore, as long as it is not broken
- If your skin becomes broken, stop applying moisturiser and seek advice from your treatment radiographers

If you have finished treatment, contact the radiotherapy department for advice, the telephone numbers at the end of this leaflet, or your own GP, or your clinical nurse specialist

- Try simple pain reducing medications if needed

Once your skin has healed:

- It is recommended that you continue to moisturise your skin.
- Try to avoid extremes in temperature, such as hot or cold showers, as your skin may remain sensitive for some time.

Patient Information

- Your skin will always be more sensitive to the sun in the area treated. Use a high factor sun cream in the future on the treated area – factor 50 or keep the area covered with appropriate sun resistant clothing.

Advice to GPs, District Nurses, and Practice Nurses:

Moisturising cream should be continued if the skin is intact. If the skin is broken, appropriate dressings or products should be used.

It is important to remember that the skin surrounding the reaction may have been included in the treatment and may be compromised. Therefore, it is not advisable to use adhesive tape or dressings on or around radiotherapy reactions, even if the skin appears to have healed.

Dressings placed on radiotherapy treated skin must be non-adhesive, or made with a suitable adhesive coating such as silicone. If dressings need to be secured in place, consider bandaging or Mepitac tape.

If a dressing is required, we would recommend hydrogels and non-adhesive hydrocolloid / alginate type dressings to provide protection, such as Mepilex or PolyMem. Paraffin and petroleum jelly-based products should not be used.

A yellow / green coloured discharge (exudate) that is naturally produced by the body may settle over the damaged skin. This is a normal part of the healing process, but if an infection is suspected a swab can be taken. The exudate is normally absorbed by the dressing. It does not need to be changed until the outer layer looks stained.

Silver Sulphadiazine (Flamazine) cream is often helpful in moist areas if there may be an infection present but can only be used on completion of radiotherapy.

Ensure that adequate analgesia is prescribed for the patient if required.

Please contact the Arden Centre below for advice:

Monday to Friday 9.00am –5.00pm

Patient Information

Macmillan Radiotherapy Specialist: Tel 024 7696 7290

Tissue Viability Assistant Practitioners: Tel 024 7696 7297

UHCW NHS Trust: 24 hour emergency advice if your GP is not available:
Ring hospital switchboard on 024 7696 4000 and ask them to bleep acute oncology on 1641.

The Trust has access to interpreting and translation services. If you need this information in another language or format, please ask or contact us on 02476 967290 and we will do our best to meet your needs.

The Trust operates a smoke free policy.

To give feedback on this leaflet please email feedback@uhcw.nhs.uk

Document History

Department:	Radiotherapy
Contact:	27290
Updated:	August 2022
Review:	August 2024
Version:	7
Q-Pulse version	– V7
Reference:	HIC/LFT/1763/13