

How to Care for Your Skin

For patients that get radiation treatment

This booklet will give you information about:

- Why it is important to take care of your skin
- What a radiation skin reaction is
- What to do if you have a skin reaction
- How to take care of your skin during and after radiation treatment
- Who to call if you have questions or concerns

Your health-care team may give you instructions that are different from what is in this booklet. Please follow the instructions given to you by your health-care team.

Why is it important to take care of my skin when I get radiation treatment?



If you take care of your skin during and after your radiation treatment you will have:

- less changes on your skin
- a lower risk of infection
- less pain
- better healing of your skin

What is a radiation skin reaction?

Radiation therapy uses high energy x-rays to kill cancer cells. Radiation will not burn you but it may cause changes to your skin. Radiation can damage your normal skin cells in the area that is treated. This may cause a skin reaction.

Your skin reaction can be:

- mild
- moderate
- severe

You might not see changes to your skin right away. It can take time for your skin to be affected in the area being treated. Each person will have a different reaction on the skin. This will depend on:

- what part of your body is being treated
- how much radiation you get
- your skin tone
- your overall health

What should I do if I have a skin reaction?



It is important to look for any signs of a skin reaction and know what you can do to manage these reactions.

Do not use extreme temperatures (very hot or very cold) on your skin such as heating pads or ice packs. This could make your skin reaction worse.



What to look for:	What you can do:
<p>Mild skin reaction: your skin looks like it has a sunburn (pink, red or darker in the treatment area). Your skin may be sore or feel tight.</p> <p>This can happen 2 to 3 weeks after you start your treatment.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use a scent-free, water-based and lanolin-free moisturizer on the treatment area (such as Lubiderm® or GlaxalBase®). Put the moisturizer on a few times a day.

What to look for:	What you can do:
<p>Moderate skin reaction: your skin starts to get dry or flaky. It may also begin to itch.</p> <p>This can happen 2 to 4 weeks after you start your treatment.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not itch, peel or rub your skin. • Use a scent-free, water-based and lanolin-free moisturizer on the treatment area such as Lubiderm® or GlaxalBase®). Put the moisturizer on a few times a day. • Let your radiation oncologist (cancer doctor) know if your skin is still itchy. You may get medication to help. • Your health-care team may tell you to do a saline soak or have a sitz bath. Your health-care team will give you information about this.

What to look for:	What you can do:
<p>Severe skin reaction: your skin may peel, open and get moist. Your skin may also weep or ooze.</p> <p>This can happen 4 to 7 weeks after you start your treatment.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stop using moisturizer on any areas of your skin that are open. Only use moisturizer on areas of the skin that are intact (no signs of open skin). • Use the medication on your skin that your doctor gives you. • Continue to do a saline soak or have a sitz bath.

How should I take care of my skin during and after radiation treatment?



During treatment:

Washing

Try to clean your skin at least once a day. When you shower or take a bath:

- Wash your skin gently (do not press too hard on the area of your skin being treated)
- Use lukewarm water
- Use a mild and scent-free soap (such as Dove[®], Neutrogena[®], Aveeno[®], Pears[®])
- Use a gentle and scent-free shampoo if your scalp is in the treatment area (such as baby shampoo)
- Use a clean and soft towel to pat the treatment area dry or let it air dry

Shaving

If you want to shave, use an electric razor. Avoid shaving if your skin is sore.

Do not use:

- **A razor with a blade**
- **Shaving cream or after shave**
- **Cologne**



Moisturizers, lotions and other skin products

Radiation can make your skin dry. Use a scent-free, water-based and lanolin-free moisturizer on the treatment area (such as Lubiderm® or GlaxalBase®).

Try to be gentle with your skin (do not press too hard on your skin).

You can use deodorant or antiperspirant if your skin in that area is intact (no signs of open skin).

Do not use:

- **Moisturizer on areas of your skin that are open**
- **Powders such as cornstarch or baby powders**
- **Scented products such as makeup, perfume or cologne**
- **Sunscreen in the treatment area during your radiation treatment**
- **Aloe vera on the area of your skin being treated**



Getting dressed

- If you are getting radiation treatment on your neck, wear shirts that are loose around your neck. Try to wear a shirt with no collar.
- If you are getting radiation treatment on your breast/chest, wear a cotton sports bra.
- If you are getting radiation treatment on your pelvis, wear loose underwear or boxer shorts.
- Cover any open areas of your skin with non-adherent dressings (does not stick to your skin).
- Keep the area of your skin being treated out of the sun or covered.

Do not use sunscreen on the area of your skin being treated during your radiation treatment.



Swimming

You can go swimming while you get treatment if you have no signs of a skin reaction (no changes in the colour of your skin, peeling, or open areas).

Do not go in a hot tub or use extreme temperatures (very hot or very cold) on the area of your skin being treated. This could make your skin reaction worse.



After treatment:

Skin reactions can get worse up to 2 weeks after your treatment is done. You may see more changes in the colour of your skin. Your skin may also peel. This will start to get better 2 to 3 weeks after your treatment is done. It will take one month to fully heal.

After your treatment is done:

- Your skin will still be sensitive to the sun. Keep the skin that was treated out of the sun or covered (such as wearing a wide-brimmed hat).
- Use at least SPF 30 sunscreen on all areas of your skin that are not covered.

Who can I call if I have questions or concerns?



If you have any questions or concerns, please let your health-care team know at your next appointment.

If you do not have an appointment coming up:

Monday to Friday 9:00 AM – 4:30 PM

- Call the Odette Cancer Centre at 416-480-5000. Ask for the Radiation Nursing Team.

Outside of these hours and on weekends and statutory holidays (24 hours a day)

- Call the After-Hours Telephone Line at 1-877-681-3057.

Odette Cancer Centre
2075 Bayview Avenue
Toronto, Ontario M4N 3M5
sunnybrook.ca/odette

Need this information in an accessible format?
Email: patienteducation@sunnybrook.ca

