

## Skin care guidance for patients receiving radiotherapy treatment

This information sheet answers some of the questions you may have about skin care during your radiotherapy treatment. If you have any further questions, please talk to your treatment team.

This advice only applies to the skin in the area being treated by radiotherapy.

### Why do I need to take care of my skin?

Radiotherapy will cause changes to the skin in the treatment area and although it may not be possible to stop a skin reaction, the current evidence suggests that following this advice will make you feel more comfortable and stop your skin from getting too sore.

The first sign of a skin reaction may not happen until you have been having treatment for a couple of weeks. For most courses of radiotherapy, the skin reaction is at its worst one to two weeks following completion of treatment.

### What is a skin reaction?

The table below describes the sequence of a radiotherapy skin reaction developing and the medical terms used.

Increasing dose and number of treatments



<b>Reaction</b>	No reaction	Reddened or darkened skin, which may be inflamed and feel hot and irritable	Dry, flaky or peeling skin that may be itchy	Peeling skin with raw, open areas and exudate (moisture) production, which is often painful and can become infected
<b>Medical term</b>		Erythema	Dry desquamation	Moist desquamation
<b>How often?</b>		Frequently	Sometimes	We will tell you if we expect this reaction

Many people having a course of radiotherapy will experience an erythema (darkening and or reddening) in the treatment area, and some will develop dry desquamation (itchy/peeling skin). A small number of patients might have the more severe reaction of moist desquamation (itchy/peeling skin with open areas) and some may not get any skin reaction at all. Your treatment team will have discussed with you what skin reactions they expect you to experience. You will be given advice and support if you develop a more severe skin reaction.

### **What can affect skin reactions?**

There are many different factors that can affect your skin reaction during radiotherapy, such as overall length of treatment, the area being treated, body shape and genetic predisposition. Some types of chemotherapy, other drug treatments and co-existing medical conditions may also increase your skin reaction. Your team will advise you ahead of the treatment if this may be the case for you and make recommendations. It is important to maintain a good diet and adequate fluid intake to promote healthy skin.

**Smoking during treatment can make your skin reaction worse – please ask for advice if you want help to stop.**

Please remember that skin reactions will vary from person to person.

### **How can I help myself?**

The basic principle for looking after your skin during radiotherapy is to avoid any causes of friction and to avoid damage caused by either chemical or mechanical means, or exposure to the sun. You should start your skin care when you begin your course of radiotherapy and before you see or feel any sign of skin reaction.

### **Washing and hygiene instructions**

It is important to keep the treatment area clean when having radiotherapy:

- Wash the skin in the treatment area gently with a mild soap or shower gel and pat dry with a soft towel. Do not use a flannel, loofah or similar
- Avoid soaking the treatment area in very hot water. Use warm water and limit the time you spend in the water
- You can use a moisturiser and apply it gently in the treatment area once or twice each day. We suggest using a moisturiser free from sodium lauryl sulphate - many products are advertised as SLS free or ask your treatment team for advice
- You can continue to use your normal deodorant under your arms (unless this irritates the skin). Discontinue if the skin is broken
- Do not use talcum powder in the treatment area
- Avoid waxing and hair removal creams or shaving in the treatment area.



## For patients having their scalp or head and neck treated

- We suggest you avoid colouring, perming or chemical straightening of your hair during, and for some weeks after completion of treatment
- Avoid shaving, unless you have discussed this with your treatment team
- You can wash your hair gently using your usual shampoo provided this is not causing irritation. Hairdryers can be used, but we suggest only using it on a low heat and holding it further away than usual.

## Clothing

- Wear loose fitting natural fibre clothing next to the treated skin, for example, a cotton T-shirt or cotton underwear
- Avoid underwired or very tight support bras if your breast is receiving treatment. It is advisable to change to a cotton prosthesis or use a cotton handkerchief between your skin and prosthesis
- If your neck is being treated, you might consider using a silk scarf to stop collars/clothing rubbing against your skin
- If you are having radiotherapy to the abdomen and pelvis, avoid wearing tight waistbands and tight underwear.

## General

- Avoid using heat pads or cooling pads or ice in the treatment area
- Try not to scratch the treatment area; if it is very itchy, please ask for advice
- Avoid using adhesive tape such as plasters in the treatment area
- Avoid using products containing alcohol. This may include make-up, perfumes and aftershave products
- Avoid using any medicated/over the counter products. Please ask for advice first
- Avoid rubbing the treatment area and activities that cause friction in the treatment area
- Avoid sun exposure and protect the area from direct sunlight. You can wear a brimmed hat and/or cover up with clothing, but you should not apply sunscreen in the treatment area
- You may swim if your skin is not broken. We suggest showering after swimming to wash off the chlorine, followed by applying your moisturiser. Stop swimming if it irritates your skin.

Your radiotherapy treatment team can advise you on the exact area being treated to inform your skin care. If you have any additional questions regarding your skincare during radiotherapy, please ask any member of your treatment team. Your skin will continue to show a reaction after you finish your treatment. Your treatment team will advise you on your continuing care. We encourage patient self-referral back for skin reaction advice after treatment has finished as required.



**Radiotherapy Review Team:** 020 8915 6048  
**Direct Line Monday -Friday 9:00-5:00pm**

**The Royal Marsden Hotline:** 020 8915 6899  
(available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week)

**Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)** at The Royal Marsden

The PALS team can help with any questions, concerns or complaints you may have about your treatment and care. Freephone: 0800 783 7176

**Macmillan Cancer Support**

The team at Macmillan Cancer Support can provide further information, advice and support regarding your treatment and lifestyle.

Freephone: 0808 808 00 00

Website: [www.macmillan.org.uk](http://www.macmillan.org.uk)

These skincare guidelines have been adapted from the Society of Radiographers guidance published 2025.

