

# Skin Conditions

## What are they?

Skin problems are a fairly common side effect of cancer treatments, particularly dry and/or itchy skin, or *pruritus*. Radiation therapy can cause these conditions because it is usually delivered through the skin, destroying rapidly growing cells and sweat glands. Dry or itchy skin can also be caused by some cancers, such as lymphoma or pancreatic cancer.

Chemotherapy can also cause dry, itchy skin; redness; and sometimes a rash. Some chemotherapy drugs can cause redness, and dry and peeling skin concentrated in the hands and feet. This is called hand-foot syndrome. Some targeted therapies can cause an acne-like rash on your face, upper chest, and back. Other drugs you may be taking, including pain relievers such as morphine, can also contribute to itchy skin.

## What are the symptoms?

Your skin may look scaly or red. You may also have an itchy or burning sensation. If your skin is very dry, underlying layers may peel away, increasing the risk of infection and possibly interrupting your treatment schedule until it heals. Scratching can also increase your risk of infection, especially since your immune system is weak. Radiation-related skin reactions typically occur 2 to 3 weeks after the therapy begins and may take 4 to 6 weeks to heal.

## How are they diagnosed?

Skin conditions are diagnosed based on your symptoms. Make sure you tell your nurse or doctor about any skin problems.

## How are they treated?

Skin problems can be treated with:

- Environmental changes, such as those described under Tips to Help.
- Alcohol-free moisturizing lotions.
- Medications, such as corticosteroid creams rubbed on the affected area or taken orally. Steroids can't be used on the area that will be irradiated, however.
- Antibiotics to treat infection or oral antihistamines to reduce itching. Anti-itching products for baths or lotions, such as Aveeno, provide soothing relief to your skin.



TIPS

## Tips to Help

To reduce itchy, dry skin:

- Drink plenty of fluids to keep your body well hydrated.
- Use lotions, creams, or oils immediately after bathing and throughout the day to prevent moisture loss. Stay away from petroleum-based products such as Vaseline, which aren't well absorbed by irradiated skin. Also avoid alcohol and glycerin based lotions.
- Choose mild products without additives or perfumes. Good options are Lubriderm, Alpha Keri, Nivea, Udderly Smooth, or Eucerin creams or lotions.
- Avoid friction or rubbing on your skin; pat yourself dry after bathing.
- Take warm baths to reduce itching, but avoid perfumed soaps.
- Wear soft, nonbinding clothes washed in mild detergent with no fragrances. Avoid tight fitting shoes.
- If your hands and feet are very dry, apply moisturizing cream or Vaseline, and then wear soft cotton socks and gloves to bed to allow the moisturizer to be thoroughly absorbed into the skin.
- Put a cool washcloth over the itchy site instead of scratching.
- Avoid direct sunlight and use sun screen at least 30 SPF or better.

## Words to Know

**Pruritus:** Itching