Skin care during cancer treatment

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The aim of treatment for cancer is to destroy or remove cancer cells. The most common treatments are surgery, chemotherapy and radiotherapy. These can be used either alone or in combination.

Radiotherapy

The effect of radiotherapy on your skin depends on many factors. These include the dose and strength of the radiotherapy, the number of treatments, the site and if you are receiving other treatments i.e. chemotherapy.

Damage to the skin cells is usually temporary. The chance of developing problems with your skin depends on the treatment you have. Talk to your doctors and nurses about your treatment and side effects.

Chemotherapy

Chemotherapy interferes with the way the cells of the body divide and reproduce themselves. Both healthy cells and cancer cells are affected by chemotherapy. Cells that rapidly divide and grow are most affected. The skin is one area that may be affected. These effects depend on the chemotherapy drug, the dose and length of treatment and if you are having other treatments.

What can happen to your skin

Skin changes due to radiotherapy can look and feel like sunburn.

These include:

- redness
- dry skin
- inflammation
- thinning of the skin.
Skin reactions can occur with some chemotherapy treatments. These include:

- increased sensitivity to sunlight
- changes in skin colour
- changes to nails
- acne like rash
- itching.

It is important to speak with your treatment team if you experience skin changes. Not everyone being treated will have side effects. You may find it reassuring to talk to your doctor and nurses about your treatment and possible effects.

**How to care for your skin**

There are things you can do to help lessen the effects from treatment on your skin. Ensure you are eating healthy foods and drinking fluids. Some gentle exercise is useful too. Inspect your skin daily for any signs of redness, swelling or discomfort. Ask the nurse at the hospital to show you how to do this.

- Avoid tight fitting clothes
- Wear soft fabrics like cotton. Avoid synthetic fabrics and heavy wool
- Avoid extremes in temperatures i.e. hot water bottles, ice packs, hair dryers
- Bathe with lukewarm water
- Gently pat the skin dry with a soft towel—do not rub
- Keep skin folds dry
- Check with your doctor before using soap, perfume, deodorant, talcum powder, creams or cosmetics on the treated area
- Protect your skin from sunlight
- Shaving in the treatment area should only be done using an electric razor.

Remember: Let the doctor or nurse know if you have any pain, redness, peeling or problems with your skin or nails. The sooner problems are dealt with, the better the outcome.

**Dealing with problems**

**Dryness**

- Try to drink 1–2 litres of fluids (water, juice, etc) a day
- Check with your doctor about creams or lotions to moisturise dry skin.

**Care in the sun**

When the UV radiation level reaches 3 and above it is strong enough to cause skin damage so skin protection is recommended. Protecting the skin from overexposure to UV radiation should include the following 5 SunSmart strategies, used in combination, for maximum protection -

- Slip on sun protective clothing that covers as much of your skin as possible.
- Slop on a SPF 30+ broad spectrum sunscreen 15 minutes before going outdoors and reapply it every 2 hours, or more regularly if involved in water activities or perspiring.
- Slap on a shady hat that provides plenty of protection to the face, neck and ears. Broad brimmed, bucket or legionnaire style hats are recommended.
- Seek shade when you are outdoors.
- Slide on wrap-around sunglasses that fit close to your face to protect the eyes. Look for EPF 10 on the label for maximum UV protection.

**Itching**

- Add a few drops of baby oil or vegetable oil to your bath water
- Avoid harsh laundry powders, scented soaps or bubble baths
• Shower with warm water
• Avoid sweating or ensure you wash/shower if you sweat excessively.

Note: Itching can result in loss of sleep, irritation and infection. It is therefore an important symptom to treat. See your doctor to assess the reason and provide treatment. Medications may be given to provide relief.

Care of your nails

Chemotherapy drugs can cause mild and temporary changes in your nails. Brittleness, grooving or discolouration can occur.

• Avoid cutting your cuticles
• Wear rubber gloves when doing dishes or housework
• Do not use artificial nails
• Keep nails short.

Skin colour changes

Chemotherapy and radiotherapy can cause changes in the skin. These include an increase in skin colour or blotchiness. This is usually temporary and will disappear after treatment has finished.

• Protect your skin from the sun
• Do not use cosmetics to cover blemishes on the skin receiving radiation treatment
• Protect skin from direct heat or cold.

Problems with your skin or nails can be prevented, treated or relieved. Seek help from the doctor or nurse as soon as symptoms occur.

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