Getting Help for Skin Changes

Radiation, chemo, and other drugs used to treat cancer can cause skin changes like rashes, dry skin, color changes, and itching. These changes are often side effects – part of a normal body response to the treatment. In this case, they are not signs of a drug allergy.

It is very important to tell your doctor or nurse about any skin changes you notice. If not treated, they can get worse and lead to infection. They may make you have to delay or even stop treatment.

What are the common skin changes I should watch for?

Rash is a common skin change. The risk of getting a rash and how bad it is depends on the type of cancer and the type and dose of the drugs used to treat it. Rashes are mild for most people. They often look a lot like acne and show up on the scalp, face, neck, chest, and upper back. In bad cases, rashes can affect other parts of the body. They may hurt and may lead to infections.

Dry skin is another side effect. The skin can become very dry and scaly. It may even crack open. This can happen on its own or with a rash.

Many of the skin changes, like rash or dryness, can cause itching.

Hand-foot syndrome (HFS) has been linked to many cancer treatment drugs. The cause is not known. A painful tenderness in the hands and feet is the earliest symptom of HFS. Then, redness and swelling start in the palms of the hands and the soles of the feet. This redness looks a lot like sunburn and may blister. In bad cases, the blisters can open up and become sores. The skin also can become dry, peel, and crack. It may burn, tingle, or feel numb.

A **moist reaction** can happen during radiation treatment, most often in areas where the skin folds, like behind the ears or under the breasts. It can lead to an infection if not treated. If your skin hurts in the area where you get treatment,

more on back →

tell your doctor or nurse. Also ask your doctor or nurse how to care for these areas.

Sun sensitivity is common. You may become sunburned more easily than usual.

Some treatments can cause skin **color changes** or make it get darker during treatment.

Many skin changes can be treated, and there are things you can do to try to prevent them. Skin side effects can and should be treated as early as possible. Tell your health care team about any changes you have. Let them know right away so they can treat any problems and try to keep them from getting worse.

What you can do to prevent or control skin changes:

- ✔ Drink a lot of fluids.
- ✔ Use only mild soaps, body washes, shampoos, lotions, or creams that do not contain alcohol, perfume, or dye. Ask what products or brands you should use.
- ✔ Wash with warm or cool water. Keep baths short, and pat yourself dry with a towel rather than rubbing your skin.
- ✔ Moisturize your skin 2 times a day. The best time to do this is right after you bathe, while your skin is still damp.
- ✔ Shave less often, or stop shaving if your skin is sore. An electric razor can help keep you from getting cut when shaving.
- ✔ Do not use laundry detergents with strong perfumes.
- ✔ Stay out of the sun as much as possible. If you will be outside, use lip balm and sunscreen with an SPF of at least 15. Wear cotton clothing and a hat, too.

Let your doctor or nurse know if:

- ✔ You have any signs of a rash.
- ✔ Your skin is itchy, dry, flaking, cracked, or hurts.

What you can do to make skin changes better:

- ✔ Do not treat your skin with over-the-counter medicines.
- ✔ Gel shoe inserts may help if the soles of your feet are tender.
- ✔ Some makeup brands can cover the rash without making it worse. Ask what products or brands you should use.
- ✔ If your skin is very dry, an oatmeal bath may be soothing.
- ✔ Try soft fabrics like cotton, and avoid fabrics that may irritate your skin, such as wool. Loose-fitting clothing often feels better than tight-fitting outfits.
- ✔ Do not spend time outside in very hot or very cold weather.
- ✔ If your doctor gives you medicines, use them the way the doctor tells you to and start them right away.

The 2 most important things you can do are take good care of your skin and let your doctor know right away about any skin changes you may have.

No matter who you are, we can help. Contact us anytime, day or night, for information and support. Call us at 1-800-227-2345, or visit www.cancer.org. We want to help you get well.

American Cancer Society®

We **save lives** and create more birthdays by helping you stay well, helping you get well, by finding cures, and by fighting back.

cancer.org | 1.800.227.2345

© 2009, American Cancer Society, Inc.
No. 214300-Rev.01/11
Models used for illustrative purposes only.