Itching

Itching can keep you awake and cause restlessness, anxiety, skin sores, and infection. Common causes of itching in people with cancer include dry skin, allergies, side effects of medicines, and cancer treatment. Other illnesses and certain kinds of cancer can also cause itching.

What to look for

- Dry, red, rough, flaky skin
- A yellowing of the skin or of the whites of eyes
- Rash or bumps
- Scratch marks
- Skin sores
- Scratching when you don’t notice it

What the patient can do

To soothe the skin

- Ask your pharmacist about skin creams that don’t contain alcohols or fragrances. Apply them 2 to 3 times a day, especially after a bath when the skin is damp. You can try calamine lotion (Caladryl®) or witch hazel if they soothe the itching, but note that they can dry the skin. Check with your cancer team if this doesn’t work.
- Bathe in warm water instead of hot.
- Add baking soda, oatmeal (in a cloth or mesh bag), or bath oil to bath water.
- Wash your skin gently using a mild, unscented soap.
- Use baking soda instead of deodorant.
- Avoid using scented or alcohol-based products on the skin (such as powders, after-shaves, or perfumes). Cornstarch-based powders may clump in moist areas and cause irritation.
- Use an electric razor rather than a blade to avoid cuts and irritation.
- Keep your room cool (60° to 70° F) and well ventilated to avoid sweating.
- Drink plenty of water and other fluids.
- Get enough rest. Ask about medicine (antihistamines) if itching keeps you awake.

To reduce the desire to scratch

- Apply cool, wet packs (such as crushed ice in a plastic bag that’s wrapped in a damp towel) to the skin. Remove the pack when it becomes warm, and let your skin dry. Use again as needed.
- Keep nails clean and short. Wear clean fabric gloves if you scratch without thinking about it.
- Try rubbing, pressure, cool cloths, or vibration instead of scratching. Avoid breaking the skin.
- Wear loose, soft clothing.
- Distract yourself with music, reading, and the company of others.
- Take medicines for itching as prescribed.

What caregivers can do

- Try using mild, unscented detergents to wash the patient’s clothes and bedding.
- If the patient scratches in their sleep, ask them to wear clean cotton gloves to reduce the chance of skin damage.

Call the cancer team if the patient:

- Has itching that does not go away after 2 or more days
- Develops yellowish skin or has urine (pee) the color of tea
- Scratches skin until it’s open or bleeding
- Has a rash that gets worse after creams or ointments have been used
- Has blisters, bright red skin, or crusts on the skin
- Has foul-smelling drainage or has pus coming from the skin
• Becomes very anxious and restless (can’t sleep through the night due to itching)
• Develops hives (itchy white or red welts on the skin), shortness of breath, swelling of the throat or face, or other signs of a severe allergic reaction

Hyperlinks


References


Cope DG, Reb AM. An *Evidence-Based Approach to the Treatment and Care of the Older Adult with Cancer*. Pittsburgh: Oncology Nursing Society, 2006.


