

Skin and Nail Changes during Cancer Treatment

Cancer treatments may cause skin and nail changes. Talk with your health care team to learn what side effects your treatment may cause. While skin problems caused by radiation therapy and chemotherapy are often mild, they may be more severe if you are receiving a stem cell transplant, targeted therapy, or immunotherapy. Let your health care team know if you notice any skin changes so they can be treated promptly.

Questions?

Sometimes [radiation therapy](#) can cause the skin on the part of your body receiving radiation to become dry and peel, itch (called pruritus), and turn red or darker. Your skin

- may look sunburned or become swollen or puffy. You may develop sores that become painful, wet, and infected. This is called a moist reaction.



- Some types of **chemotherapy** can cause your skin to become dry, itchy, red or darker, or peel. You may develop a minor rash or sunburn easily; this is called photosensitivity. Some people also have skin pigmentation changes. Your nails may be dark and cracked, and your cuticles may hurt. If you received radiation therapy in the past, the area of skin where you received radiation may

When cancer treatments cause skin and nail problems, there are creams and lotions that can help your skin to feel better.

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become red, blister, peel, or hurt. This is called radiation recall. Signs of an allergic response to chemotherapy may include a sudden or severe rash or hives or a burning sensation.

- [Stem cell transplants](#) can cause graft-versus-host disease (GVHD), which may cause skin problems such as a rash, blisters, or thickening of the skin.
- Some types of [immunotherapy](#) can cause a severe and sometimes extensive rash. Your skin may be dry or blister.
- Some types of [targeted therapy](#) may cause dry skin, a rash, and nail problems. If you develop a rash, it is important to talk with your doctor before stopping targeted therapy.

**Ask Your Health Care Team
about Skin and Nail
Changes**

- What skin and nail changes might I have, based on the cancer treatment I am receiving?
- Which symptoms can be managed at home? Which symptoms need urgent medical care?

If you have a severe, extensive, blistering, or painful rash and are receiving immunotherapy, call your doctor to get their advice. It's especially important to call about rashes that involve the eyes or a mucous membrane, such as your mouth, caused by immunotherapy.

Make note of all problems you should call your health care team about.

Skin changes:

- acne (acneiform eruptions)
- bed sores ([pressure ulcers](#))

- blisters
- burning or skin pain
- dry skin
- hand-foot syndrome (palmar-plantar erythrodysesthesia)
- hyperpigmentation (darker areas of skin, tongue, and joints)
- hypopigmentation (patches of skin that are lighter)
- itchy skin ([pruritus](#))
- keratoacanthoma (dome-shaped skin growth)
- peeling, flakey, or crusty skin
- photosensitivity (sunburn easily)
- rash
- red or darkened skin
- sores that are painful
- swollen skin

Nail changes:

- cracked nails
- cuticles that are swollen and/or painful
- nail infections (acute paronychia)
- yellow nails

Ways to prevent or manage mild skin and nail changes during cancer treatment

Talk with your health care team to learn if you should manage these problems at home.

Depending upon the treatment you are receiving, your health care team may advise you to take these steps:

- **Use only recommended skin products.** Use mild soaps that are gentle on your skin. Ask your nurse to recommend specific skin

products. If you are receiving radiation therapy, ask about skin products, such as powder or antiperspirant, that you should avoid using before treatment.

- **Prevent infection.** Radiation therapy can cause skin in the treatment area to peel, become painful, and wet. Most often this happens in areas where the skin folds, such as around your ears, breast, or bottom. Try to keep the area clean and dry so it does not become infected. Your nurse will talk with you about how to clean the area and may prescribe special dressings that you can apply to the area and/or antibiotics.
- **Moisturize your skin.** Use recommended creams or lotions to prevent your skin from becoming dry and itchy. Irritated skin can become infected. Ask about special creams or ointments for severely dry, itchy, or painful skin.

- **Protect your skin.** Use sunscreen and sun-protective lip balm. Wear a loose-fitting long-sleeved shirt, pants, and a hat with a wide brim when outdoors to prevent sunburn. If you are receiving radiation therapy, don't use heating pads, ice packs, or bandages on the treatment area. You may want to shave less often and use an electric razor or stop shaving if your skin is tender and sore.
- **Prevent or treat dry, itchy skin.** Avoid products that list alcohol or fragrance as an ingredient, since they can dry or irritate your skin. Your nurse may suggest you add colloidal oatmeal to your baths, as it can reduce itching. Take short showers or baths in lukewarm, not hot, water. Put on skin cream or ointment that is recommended by your nurse after drying off from a shower but while your skin is still a little damp. Apply a cool washcloth or ice to dry, itchy skin.
- **Prevent or treat minor nail problems.** Keep your nails clean and cut short to avoid

accidentally tearing them. Protect your hands and nails by wearing gloves when you wash the dishes, or clean the house, for example. Avoid getting manicures and pedicures. Don't wear tight-fitting shoes. Ask your nurse to recommend products that can be used to treat nail problems.

- **Learn about treatments for irritating or painful skin rashes.** Sometimes skin problems need medical treatment. Your rash may be treated with a medicated cream (topical corticosteroids) or with medicine that you take as a pill (oral corticosteroids or antibiotics).

Talking with your health care team about skin and nail changes

Prepare for your visit by making a list of questions to ask. Consider adding these questions to your list:

- What skin-and nail related side effects are common for the type of treatment I'm receiving?
- Are there steps I can take to prevent any of these problems?
- What problems should I call you about? Are there any problems that need urgent medical care?
- When might these problems start? How long might they last?
- What brands of soap and lotion would you advise me to use on my skin? On my nails?
- Are there skin and nail products I should avoid?
- Should I see a dermatologist so I can learn more about how to prevent or manage skin problems?

Related Resources

Pruritus (PDQ®)–Patient Version

New Drugs, New Side Effects: Complications of Cancer Immunotherapy

Side Effects of Cancer Treatment

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