Caring for Your Skin

Minimize side effects, soothe skin and speed recovery from radiation therapy.

March 15, 2021 By Kate Ferguson

Radiation is a standard treatment for many cancers and is used both for curative purposes and to minimize cancer-related pain by shrinking tumors (see "Radiation Therapy" Basics). But it can cause skin to burn, peel, itch and dry out and can lead to sores and rashes. Ask your care team to recommend specific skin care products, and follow these tips to help minimize unpleasant side effects.

Wash treated skin softly. Using only your hands, gently apply a fragrance-free, low-pH cleanser or mild soap on treated skin, and splash with tepid water. (Do not disturb any markings placed on the body for proper positioning of treatment machines.)

Moisturize daily. Dry, itchy skin can easily become irritated and infected. Specially formulated topical products help skin recover more quickly, but don’t use them on wounds.

Avoid hand razors. Treated skin can develop painful rashes when scraped with razors. Instead, when shaving, use an electric razor, or skip shaving temporarily, especially if your skin is sore or tender. Men who get radiation in the head or neck area should avoid aftershave, as alcohol and scents can irritate treated skin.

Steer clear of potential irritants. Avoid powders, antiperspirants, deodorants, perfumes, cosmetics, creams or lotions, adhesive-backed medical supplies and heat and ice packs.

Protect sensitive skin. Irradiated skin is more sensitive to heat, cold and sun exposure. Before going outside, apply a sunscreen with an SPF of at least 30, and cover your head to shield it from sunlight, heat and cold. Wear loose-fitting clothing to avoid chafing.

Monitor symptoms. Follow directions for home care of wounds, sores, scabs or rashes. If you experience distressing symptoms, call your oncologist or dermatologist.

6 Ways to Soothe Skin

1. Cleanse gently with warm water and low-pH soap, using hands only.
2. Apply moisturizer frequently.

3. Avoid shaving with a hand razor.
4. Choose personal hygiene products that are free of possible irritants.
5. Dress warmly in loose-fitting clothing; protect exposed skin with sunscreen (SPF 30 or above).
6. If you have distressing symptoms, call your doctor.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.