

Caring for Your Skin Through Cancer Treatment

Skin reactions are common during cancer treatment.

Skin reactions are not unusual among cancer patients. In fact, for some medications, a rash is considered a sign that the therapy is working. The good news is skin reactions are usually temporary and treatments are available to help manage symptoms and provide lasting relief. Early intervention is key to preventing side effects from worsening.

Why skin changes occur

Skin changes are caused by the way some cancer therapies work. Many work by targeting specific cells. Those same cells are also abundant in our skin, hair and nails, so therapies that target those can affect skin cells too.

What is dry skin?

Dry skin lacks moisture. The outermost protective layer of the skin (called the epidermis) is made up of dead cells and natural oils that help trap moisture and keep the skin soft and smooth. If there isn't enough water, or the protective oils are diminished, the skin barrier can become dry, cracked and rough with flakes or scales, itchiness and redness.

What causes dry skin?

There are many causes of dry skin, but for cancer patients, treatment is often the cause. Your skin cells continually renew themselves by dividing, rising to the surface and sloughing off. Cancer therapies can disrupt this process resulting in skin rashes, dry skin, itching and discomfort.



Types of cancer treatments and their effects on the skin

- **Chemotherapy** can cause damage to healthy cells while working to destroy cancer cells. This can include damaging your typically fast-growing skin and nail cells resulting in dry, itchy or red skin and darkened or yellowed nails.
- **Biological therapy**, which includes immunotherapy, is a type of treatment that uses substances made from living organisms to treat cancer. Side effects may include pain, swelling, soreness, redness, itchiness, and even a rash at the site of infusion or injection.
- **Radiation therapy** can cause side effects similar to a sunburn, resulting in dryness, peeling, itching, and changes in skin color.
- **Targeted therapy** blocks the growth and spread of cancer by slowing or preventing cancer cells from growing and dividing. This may in turn prevent healthy cells from growing normally resulting in dry skin, acneiform rash (looks like acne, but it's not), and nail problems.

Before starting treatment

Your doctor may suggest measures to care for your skin even before your treatment begins. If you do notice any rashes or skin changes, it's important to tell your cancer care team right away. Don't stop your cancer treatment without first speaking to your doctor.

Tips for managing dry, itchy skin

- Use mild, soap-free, fragrance-free, alcohol-free and dye-free products designed for sensitive skin.
- Cleanse with cool or lukewarm (not hot) water.
- Try oatmeal bath products to soothe your skin.
- Avoid scrubbing the skin during bathing and gently pat skin dry afterward.
- Moisturize your skin at least twice a day – the best time is immediately after bathing to prevent skin drying.
- For immediate relief, try a cool compress on the affected area, pat dry and then apply moisturizer.
- Let your skin rest. As hard as it is, try not to scratch or pick at your skin.
- Avoid over-the-counter acne medications (e.g., benzoyl peroxide) that can irritate your skin.
- Stay out of the sun as much as possible. Use a broad-spectrum SPF 30 or higher sunscreen daily.
- Keep your home cool and humid. Use a humidifier if you live in a dry climate or are using the heater to keep your house warm.
- Wear comfortable cotton clothing – avoiding synthetic materials that are rough against your skin.
- Use laundry detergents and fabric softeners without heavy fragrances.
- Eat a healthy diet and drink plenty of fluids to help keep your skin hydrated and healthy.

Brought to you by **Aveeno**®

American Cancer Society. <https://www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/physical-side-effects/hair-skin-nails/skin-rash.html> Accessed 2.16.23

National Cancer Institute. <https://www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/treatment/side-effects/skin-nail-changes> Accessed 2.16.23

American Cancer Society. <https://www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/treatment-types/targeted-therapy/side-effects.html> Accessed 2.16.23

American Cancer Society. <https://www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/treatment-types/radiation/effects-on-different-parts-of-body.html> Accessed 2.16.23

National Cancer Institute. <https://www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/treatment/types/immunotherapy/side-effects> Accessed 2.16.23

American Cancer Society. <https://www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/physical-side-effects/hair-skin-nails/dry-skin.html> Accessed 2.16.23