

Taking Care of Your Skin During Radiation Therapy



Princess Margaret

Information for patients who are having radiation therapy

Read this pamphlet to learn about:

- What a radiation skin reaction is
- How to take care of your skin during therapy
- What to do if you have a skin reaction
- How to do saline soaks and sitz baths

For more information on Radiation Therapy, please watch our patient education videos at www.whattoexpectrt.theprincessmargaret.ca.

These videos offer a step-by-step guide to the radiation therapy treatment process. They also explain how radiation works in the body and how your team works together to deliver the highest quality treatments.

Please visit the UHN Patient Education website for more health information: www.uhnpatienteducation.ca
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What is a radiation skin reaction?

Although radiation does not burn you, the changes to your skin may appear like a sunburn. Changes appear slowly over time and only in the treatment area. This is a normal reaction to radiation therapy.

Your treatment team will show you the area that may be affected. They can also explain what you can expect to see with your skin over the weeks of your treatment.

Why is it important to take care of my skin during radiation therapy?

Taking care of your skin in the treatment area will help:

- minimize the changes
- reduce any irritation (for mild reactions)
- reduce the risk of infection (for more severe reactions)
- help your skin recover after treatment

What can I do to prevent a reaction?

You cannot prevent a skin reaction. To minimize a skin reaction:

- Keep your skin clean. Wash every day with a mild soap and rinse with water.
- Apply a moisturizer a few times a day starting before or on the first day of your treatment. Keep using moisturizer on skin that is intact (skin not broken or open) until you are told to use a different product.
- Protect your skin from other sources of damage, such as sun exposure and extreme temperatures.

Caring for my skin during treatment

What do I do if my skin is irritated?

Your skin may feel irritated during your treatment. It may also be red and swollen. Your skin may feel dry, tight, and/or itchy.

Do these things if your skin is irritated:

- Use unscented moisturizer on the affected area as many times a day as you can. It is okay to have unscented moisturizer on your skin during treatment.
- Continue washing the affected area (see page 4).
- Talk to your doctor if your skin continues to itch. He/she can prescribe medicated cream that can be used during treatment.

What do I do if my skin is dry and flaky?

Your skin may feel dry and flaky. This may cause it to itch. Your skin may also be red and sensitive. You may notice you sweat less.

Do these things if your skin is dry and flaky:

- Let the skin peel off by itself. **Do not peel off loose skin.**
- Use unscented moisturizer on the affected area as many times a day as you can. It is okay to have unscented moisturizer on your skin during treatment.
- Talk to your doctor if your skin continues to itch. He/she can prescribe medicated cream that can be used during treatment.
- Do a saline soak or a sitz bath. Instructions are on page 7.

What do I do if my skin is open and moist?

Some of your skin may peel off. It may be open and moist. Your skin may also weep (ooze). A nurse can check and bandage your skin. He or she can also help you with medicated cream and pain medicine.

Do these things if your skin is open and moist:

- Do a saline soak or sitz bath often. Instructions are on page 7.
- Gently wash the area using a spray bottle with a soft mist.
- Use a protective cream such as Proshield Plus® on the open skin. You can use Proshield Plus on your skin during treatment. You can also use a medicated cream if it's prescribed by your doctor. **Do not use any other creams or moisturizers on open skin.** You can still use unscented moisturizer on skin that is **not** open or moist.
- Use a medicated cream if prescribed by your doctor.

What do I do if my skin is bleeding, blistered, or infected?

See a nurse if your skin is bleeding, blistered, or infected. Your treatment team will make a plan to care for your skin. **Do not treat this reaction on your own.**

How do I wash my skin in the treatment area?

It is important to keep your skin clean to avoid infection.

1. Wash your skin gently using lukewarm water.

Avoid very hot and very cold water.

2. Use mild unscented soap (such as Dove, Neutrogena, Aveeno, Pears). You may also use baby soap in the treatment area. Use baby shampoo if your scalp is in the treatment area.

3. Use a clean, soft towel to pat your skin dry.

Avoid rubbing your skin.

Can I use moisturizer on my skin that is in the treatment area?

You can use moisturizer as soon and as often as you wish. It is important to use unscented moisturizer often if your skin is dry.

1. Wash your hands before using moisturizer.

This is important if your skin is cracked or peeled. This helps to avoid infection.

2. Use an unscented, lanolin-free moisturizing cream as many times a day as you can.

If you would like help choosing a cream, talk to your pharmacist or health care team. It is okay to have unscented, lanolin-free moisturizing cream on your skin during treatment.

3. Do not use aloe vera gel on dry, irritated skin.

This can make your skin more irritated.

Can I use antiperspirant or deodorant?

You can use these products in the treatment area if your skin is not peeling or open. Use an unscented deodorant. This is less likely to irritate your skin.

How do I shave my skin in the treatment area?

It is okay to shave your affected skin. Use an electric razor. Try shaving less often. Avoid shaving the affected area if it is irritated.

Do not use these products as they may cause more irritation:

- A bladed razor
- Shaving cream
- Aftershave
- Products with alcohol

What kind of clothing should I wear?

Wear soft, loose clothing in the treatment area. It is important to cover your skin to protect it from sun, heat, and cold. Stay in the shade when possible.

Examples:

Treatment area	Clothing suggestions
Breast or Chest	Cotton sports bra
Pelvis	Loose boxer shorts
Neck	Shirts with an open collar

What else should I avoid?

Your skin will be sensitive during radiation therapy. You should avoid swimming and using hot tubs **if** the irritated skin would be directly in the water.

During treatment avoid using:

- Powders, such as cornstarch or baby powder
- Tape, bandages, and adhesives
- Heating pads and cold packs
- Scented products, such as make up, perfume and cologne
- Sunscreen

Talk to your treatment team if you are unsure which products to use in the treatment area.

Caring for my skin after treatment

Continue caring for your skin as described above until it has completely healed.

A skin reaction usually improves 2 to 3 weeks after radiation therapy. Your skin colour usually returns to normal 3 to 4 weeks after treatment. Your skin will still be sensitive after it is healed.

Do these things after your skin has healed:

- Be gentle with the skin that was affected.
- Use moisturizer at least once a day.
- Avoid sun exposure in the area that was affected.
- Use sunscreen with SPF 30 or higher if you go in the sun. Reapply often.

How to do a saline soak and sitz bath

What is a saline soak?

A saline soak is used to bathe skin affected by radiation therapy. It will help keep the affected skin clean and avoid infection. It may also help you feel more comfortable.

A saline soak can help reduce:

- Swelling
- Redness
- Irritation
- Itchiness

Where can I buy saline solution?

You can buy sterile saline solution at any drugstore. Only buy saline solution that is 0.9%. If you buy sterile saline, you can use it right from the bottle – you do not need to boil it.

Do not use saline solution that is made for contact lenses. This type of saline solution has preservatives. Preservatives may irritate your skin.

You can also make saline solution at home.

How do I make saline solution at home?

Things you will need:

- A clean pot to boil water
- Clean jar with a lid
- Clean soft cloth (a thick face cloth or J-cloth)
- Table salt
- Clean bowl

1. Pour 4 cups (1 litre) of tap water into a pot. Add 2 level teaspoons (10 ml) of table salt.
2. Bring the solution to a boil. Mix until the salt is dissolved. Allow the solution to cool.
3. Pour the cooled saline solution into a clean jar. Cover with a lid.
4. Write the date the solution was made on the jar.
5. Store the saline solution on the counter or in the fridge. Most people like it at room temperature.
6. Throw away any unused saline after 2 days.

How do I do a saline soak?

1. **Wash your hands.**
2. **Place a clean, soft towel in a bowl.** A thick facecloth or J-cloth works best.
3. **Wet the cloth with saline.**
4. **Gently squeeze the cloth to wring out extra liquid.**
5. **Place the cloth over the affected skin for 5 to 10 minutes.** Do not leave the cloth on your skin too long or it will dry out. **Avoid rubbing your skin.**
6. **Remove the cloth.**
7. **Let the area air-dry for 1 to 2 minutes.**
8. **Repeat these steps on other affected areas.** Wash your hands and use a new cloth and bowl each time.
9. **You should apply a saline soak 3 to 4 times a day** or more often if it makes you feel more comfortable. Keep doing the saline soaks until the area is healed, even after radiation treatment has finished.
10. **Apply a lotion or cream after the skin is dry.**

What is a sitz bath?

A sitz bath is used to soak the skin in your pelvis and groin area. It is usually done in your bathtub. It can also be done in your toilet using a plastic sitz bath. You can buy a toilet sitz bath at a drug store. Choose the method that allows you to fully soak the affected area.

Sitz baths can be made using:

- Baking soda (not baking powder)
- Table salt
- Epsom salt

How often should I take a sitz bath?

You can take a sitz bath as many times as you need to feel comfortable. It is usually done 3 to 4 times a day. You can take a sitz bath after each bowel movement if your anal area is sore.

How do I take a sitz bath?

- 1. Fill the bathtub about 13 cm (5 inches) deep with warm water.** The water should be about 37 °C to 39 °C (99 °F to 102 °F). **Do not use hot water.** Test the water using your wrist. If it feels hot on your wrist it is too hot to soak in.
- 2. Choose 1 of these salts:**
 - a. baking soda
 - b. table salt
 - c. Epsom salt
- 3. Add the salt you chose to the bath.** Do not use all three salts. Mix the water to dissolve the salt.

Type of salt	Amount (for bathtub)
Baking soda (sodium bicarbonate)	½ cup (125 ml)
Table salt	¾ cup (190 ml)
Epsom salt	¾ cup (190 ml)

4. **Sit in the bath and soak your buttocks for 10 to 15 minutes.** Use a piece of foam to raise your buttocks off the bottom of the tub. This will help expose the affected area to the bath water.
5. **Dry your bottom using a clean, soft towel.** Avoid using a terrycloth towel, as it leaves lint on your skin. You can also lie down and let the affected area air dry. You can also dry the affected area using a fan or a hair dryer on the cool setting.
6. **Clean the bathtub after each use.** Use fresh water and baking soda or salt each time you soak.

How do I use a toilet sitz bath?

1. **Lift the toilet seat and put the plastic sitz bath in the toilet bowl.**
2. **Fill the sitz bath 2/3 full with warm water.** The water should be about 37 °C to 39 °C (99 °F to 102 °F). Test the water using your wrist. If it feels hot on your wrist it is too hot to soak in. **Do not use hot water.**
3. **Add one of the following salts to the bath.** Do not use all three salts. Mix the water to dissolve the salt.

Type of salt	Amount (for toilet sitz bath)
Baking soda (sodium bicarbonate)	½ to 1 level tablespoon (10 to 15 ml)
Table salt	1 to 2 teaspoons (5 to 10 ml)
Epsom salt	1 to 2 teaspoons (5 to 10 ml)

4. **Sit in the sitz bath and soak your buttocks for 10 to 15 minutes.** Your buttocks should not touch the bottom of the sitz bath. Extra water will run into the toilet through the holes.
5. **Dry your bottom gently with a clean, soft towel.** Avoid using a terrycloth towel, as it leaves lint on your skin. You can also lie down and let the affected area air dry. You can also dry the affected area using a fan or a hair dryer on the cool setting. After your skin is dry, wear cotton underwear with no elastic in the legs (for example, boxer shorts).
6. **Clean the toilet sitz bath after each use.** Use fresh water and baking soda or salt each time you soak.