



Information for  
patients and  
carers

**After Radiotherapy  
to the Skin**

This booklet contains information for patients that have completed a course of radiotherapy to the skin. The information is a general guide to help manage side effects from the treatment.

Side effects can vary from one person to another and some patients may not experience any side effects from their treatment. It is normal for the effects from radiotherapy to continue for a few weeks after your treatment has been completed. These effects may get slightly worse during this period, followed by gradual improvement.

## Skin reactions

Skin reactions are the most common side effect when treating the skin with radiotherapy. The severity of reaction varies between patients. Radiotherapy can cause the skin to become red, sore, dry and itchy. The treated area may bleed/weep easily and a scab may form. Sometimes the skin can blister or break, which can be painful. Side effects are generally at their worst 7-10 days after treatment has finished and have usually settled by the time you have your radiotherapy follow-up appointment. If skin has peeled or blistered, it may take longer to heal.

## General skin care advice

Please continue with the skin care advice you were given during your radiotherapy. The main points to remember are:

- Wear loose fitted natural fibre clothing (such as cotton) next to the area of treatment
- Use a moisturiser to reduce irritation to the treated area. The moisturiser should be free-from an ingredient called sodium lauryl sulphate (SLS – sometimes known as sodium laureth sulfate or sodium dodecyl sulfate). Suitable SLS-free moisturizers include Cetraben, ZeroAQS, Doublebase and Aveeno

- Avoid very hot or very cold water when washing the area. Use a soft cotton towel and pat the area dry to avoid irritation
- Avoid perfumed products and talcum powder in the treatment area for a couple of weeks after treatment has finished
- Avoid shaving the treatment area until any skin reactions have settled
- Avoid exposing the treatment area to the sun during radiotherapy and until any skin reaction has settled down. A high factor sun cream (anything over SPF 30) is advised in the treatment area following radiotherapy, as the skin will always be more sensitive to the sun
- Chlorine in water may irritate the skin. It may be advisable to avoid swimming for a few weeks after treatment, until the skin reaction settles down.

## Sore or red skin

Your skin may become dry, pink/red and sore in the treatment area (similar to sunburn). It may become pink and itchy approximately a week after your first radiotherapy session and usually lasts for a few weeks after treatment finishes. Where skin is intact and dry, a moisturiser should be used to reduce irritation to the treated area. The moisturiser should be free from an ingredient called sodium lauryl sulphate. If skin does become cracked, blistered or breaks down, you may be given other products or dressings to use. If skin becomes sore, you may need to take pain relief. You can discuss this, or any other issues with the radiotherapy team using the contact details provided on your 'Treatment Summary' (see the section titled 'End of treatment summary' for more information).

## Scabbing

During your treatment, the area may form a crust or a scab. The scab may form, fall off and re-form several times during the course of treatment and for a few weeks after your treatment finishes. This is a normal healing process for the skin. Avoid picking at the scab and keep the area as clean as possible to reduce the chance of getting an infection.

## Bleeding/weeping skin

The skin in the treated area may peel or flake and then result in bleeding or weeping skin. It is important to keep the area of treatment clean by using warm water and gently patting dry. Avoid rubbing, as this will cause irritation. Non-stick dressings can be used to help absorb any fluid and reduce the risk of infection. Avoid sticking plaster or tape on the treated area. If you suspect you have an infection (greenish/yellowish discharge), please contact your GP. Avoid using ointment, powder or creams on skin that is weeping, unless you have been advised to do so by the radiotherapy staff.

## Scalp

For radiotherapy to the scalp, wash hair gently with your usual shampoo but avoid using a hairdryer. Allow the hair to dry naturally or gently pat the area dry, avoid rubbing the skin. Avoid the use of hair dye in this area until the reaction has settled down.

## Lining of the nose

If your radiotherapy treatment is to the skin of the nose, then the inside of the nose can become sore. This may also cause spots of blood or mild nose bleeds when you blow your nose. This may happen for up to 2 weeks after your radiotherapy treatment has finished, but varies from person to person.

## Inside of the mouth

If your treatment is close to your lips, the inside of the mouth may also become sore, cracked and cause blisters/ulcers. Bleeding can also occur for a couple of weeks after your treatment has finished. Good oral hygiene is important – using a soft toothbrush may help to reduce pain when brushing teeth. Regularly rinsing your mouth with mouthwash or salt water can help. Avoid smoking, as this can make these reactions worse.

## Hair loss

Hair in the treatment area may fall out, including hair on your head, eyebrow, beard or body hair. Hair only falls out in the treatment area, so it may fall out in patches. This usually occurs 2-3 weeks after your first treatment. Hair usually starts to grow back 6-12 months after treatment finishes, but sometimes hair loss can be permanent. The likelihood of permanent hair loss depends on how much radiation you receive. Ask your consultant if it is likely that your hair loss will be permanent. If you would like to wear a wig, you can ask your doctor to apply for one for you.

Support can be given for cancer-related hair loss by visiting the MacMillan website:

<https://www.macmillan.org.uk/cancer-information-and-support/impacts-of-cancer/hair-loss/wigs-for-cancer-treatment>

## Tiredness/fatigue

It is quite common for you to feel tired towards the end of radiotherapy and for several weeks afterwards. This is because the body is recovering after treatment. It is important to rest when you need to but also to do some regular gentle exercise. Eat a balanced, nutritious diet and drink plenty of water or water-based fluids. This will help your body to repair and prevent fatigue.

## Follow up

You will receive a follow up appointment for approximately 6-12 weeks after your radiotherapy has finished. This will be with a member of the oncology review team. You may see your oncologist, a specialist nurse or an advanced clinical practitioner.

## Returning to work

You can return to work as soon as you feel well enough. This timescale may vary depending on how many treatments of radiotherapy you have had, the demands of your job and how you feel in yourself. If you need a sick note, you can ask your GP for this.

## Late effects from radiotherapy

These side effects may occur many months or years after your radiotherapy treatment has finished. However, it is important that you are aware that these can happen. They will have been discussed with you when you consented for treatment.

- The area of skin that has received radiotherapy may appear slightly discoloured or paler than the surrounding skin. This is common in the months following radiotherapy and will not cause any physical problems
- Less commonly you may notice tiny blood vessels under your skin. This is known as telangiectasia. It is a permanent side effect but will not cause you any problems, but may affect cosmetic appearance
- On rare occasions, an ulcer may form that requires long-term dressing or a small operation to remove it
- Hair loss may be permanent (only within the treatment area)
- The area of treatment will always be more sensitive to the sun – so ensure this is kept covered or use a high factor sun cream

## Self-care

It is important to continue to regularly check your skin. If you notice any new or changing growths, make an appointment to see your GP or contact your specialist nurse.

## End of treatment summary

The end of treatment summary will have been given to you after your final treatment. A copy of this is also sent to your GP. It will contain personalised information relating to your specific treatment and contact

details if you need any further support or advice. If you have experienced a treatment reaction, the summary will provide specific advice to help you look after yourself at home.

Any medications or skin care products you have been prescribed during your treatment will be listed, allowing you to get further prescriptions from your GP if necessary.

The summary will contain specific information relating to the area you had treated, the dose of radiotherapy and the number of treatments you have received. The information relating to side effects and medications will help your GP to understand the type of reaction you have experienced and help them to continue your care. You can show the summary to other health care professionals who are involved in your care.

## Contact details

Should you require further advice or information please contact:

Radiotherapy Reception/Transport queries (01772) 522900

Radiotherapy Appointment queries (01772) 522931

## Sources of further information

[www.lancsteachinghospitals.nhs.uk](http://www.lancsteachinghospitals.nhs.uk)

[www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)

[www.patient.co.uk](http://www.patient.co.uk)

[www.accessable.co.uk](http://www.accessable.co.uk)

[www.macmillan.org.uk](http://www.macmillan.org.uk)

All our patient information leaflets are available on our website for patients to access and download:

[www.lancsteachinghospitals.nhs.uk/patient-information-leaflets](http://www.lancsteachinghospitals.nhs.uk/patient-information-leaflets)



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If you want to stop smoking you can also contact the Quit Squad Freephone 0800 328 6297.

Please ask if you would like help in understanding this information. This information can be made available in large print and in other languages.

**Gujarati:**

આ માહિતીને સમજવામાં સહાયતા જોઈતી હોય તો કૃપા કરીને પૂછો. આ માહિતી મોટા છપાણામાં અને અન્ય ભાષામાં ઉપલબ્ધ કરી શકાય છે.

**Romanian:**

Vă rugăm să întrebați dacă aveți nevoie de ajutor pentru înțelegerea acestor informații. Aceste informații pot fi puse la dispoziție în format mare și în alte limbi.”

**Polish:**

Poinformuj nas, jeśli potrzebna jest ci pomoc w zrozumieniu tych informacji. Informacje te można również udostępnić dużym drukiem oraz w innych językach

**Punjabi:**

ਜੇ ਤੁਸੀਂ ਇਹ ਜਾਣਕਾਰੀ ਸਮਝਣ ਵੱਲ ਮਦਦ ਲੈਣੀ ਚਾਹੋਗੇ ਤਾਂ ਕਰਿਪਾ ਕਰਕੇ ਇਸ ਬਾਰੇ ਪੁੱਛੋ। ਇਹ ਜਾਣਕਾਰੀ ਵੱਡੇ ਪ੍ਰਿੰਟ ਅਤੇ ਹੋਰਨਾਂ ਭਾਸ਼ਾਵਾਂ ਵੱਲ ਮੁਹੱਈਆ ਕੀਤੀ ਜਾ ਸਕਦੀ ਹੈ।

**Urdu:**

دوسری زبانوں اور ریڑی اگر آپ کو ہی معلومات سمجھنے کے لیے مدد کی ضرورت ہے تو یچیچھیا جس یبھ ابی دست ہو یسکت ہے براے مہر یبان پوے یچھدی۔ معلومات

**Arabic:**

مطبوعة بأحرف كبيرة وبلغات إذا كنت تريد مساعدة في فهم هذه المعلومات يرجى أن تطلب أخرى يمكن توفير هذه المعلومات

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