Radiation Therapy – Skin Care

You may notice some redness or tanning of the skin in the treatment area while receiving radiation therapy. This is NOT a burn, just an expected reaction to radiation therapy, called radiation dermatitis. The dermatitis sometimes can cause the skin to blister, peel and weep. This does not happen to everyone. While you are getting treatment and for several weeks after treatment, the skin must be protected from further injury.

**Things to do:**

Clean the skin GENTLY. Remember you may be treated in areas where you cannot see marks (such as your back and sides). You may take showers or mild warm baths. Wash the treated skin with mild soap, rinse thoroughly, and pat dry. Do NOT scrub over skin marks. If they come off anyway, please do not try to re-draw them. Try to keep the areas as dry as possible. Cornstarch or powders made with cornstarch may be used. If possible, try to keep the area uncovered and exposed to the air as much as possible to help keep it dry.

If itching should develop, notify your doctor or nurse in Radiation Oncology at MercyOne Waterloo Cancer Center. Try not to rub, scratch or massage the treated skin. Do NOT use any over-the-counter creams, lotions or ointments without checking with the doctor or nurse in Radiation Oncology first. Some of these products can make things worse. We will give you a cream or ointment especially made for radiation dermatitis if needed.

**Things to avoid:**

- Tight-fitting clothes and harsh fabrics around treated skin (bras, pantyhose, wool, etc.) Try to wear lightweight, loose-fitting clothing.
- Sunburn in the treatment area. Keep the area covered and/or use sunscreen (SPF 15 or above) when outside. Do not apply sunscreen to open areas. Wait until they are healed.
- Letting the skin get too hot or too cold. Do not use hot water bottles, heating pads or ice packs in the treatment area, unless told to do so by your doctor or nurse in Radiation Oncology. Keep the treated skin covered in the winter cold and wind. You may need a hat and/or scarf too.
- Swimming in salt water or chlorinated swimming pools, particularly if your skin blisters or peels. Also stay away from hot tubs. If you swim for exercise, ask your doctor if it alright to continue during treatment.
- Putting any deodorants, perfumes or cosmetics on treated skin. Use only creams, ointments and powders recommended by the Radiation Oncology staff. You may use any products that you choose on skin not being treated. Just be careful to keep them away from treated skin.
- Shaving hair in the treated area. If you must shave, we advise using an electric razor.
- Putting tape, Band-Aids or dressings on treated skin. Try to keep it uncovered as much as possible. If it becomes necessary to bandage the area, ask your nurse for suggestions.

If your skin gets red or tan, the color will fade over time. It may take several weeks to months and some color change may be permanent, particularly in African-Americans. If you get blisters, it generally takes three to five weeks for the blisters to heal and skin to regrow. PLEASE be patient – these blisters almost always heal on their own. The doctors and nurses will advise you what to do to help them heal. Remember, even after your treatments are done, the treated skin will remain more sensitive to heat, cold and sunburn than untreated skin. Make sure you protect it correctly with clothing and sunscreens.