Radiation Therapy – Superficial treatment

Superficial X-rays are low-energy X-rays that do not penetrate very far before they are absorbed. They are useful in radiation therapy for the treatment of various benign or malignant skin problems.

Treatment with superficial X-rays does not cause side effects to the deep tissues. The only side effects you may see involve the skin in the treatment area. You may notice redness, blistering or bleeding in the treatment area during your treatment course and for several weeks after the treatments are finished. This is NOT a burn, but an expected reaction to radiation, called radiation dermatitis. During this time, you need to protect the skin from further injury.

Things to do:
Clean the skin GENTLY. Showers and mild warm baths may be taken. Wash the treated skin with mild soap, rinse thoroughly and pat dry. If you can, try to keep the area uncovered and exposed to air as much as possible to help keep it dry.

Do not rub, scratch, or massage the treated skin. Do NOT use any over-the-counter creams, lotions or ointments without checking with a doctor or nurse in Radiation Oncology first. Some of these products can make things worse. We will give you a cream or ointment specially made for radiation dermatitis, if needed.

Things to avoid:
• Exposing treated skin to the sun. Wear protective clothing when outdoors and use sunscreen, at least SPF 15 or above. If skin is open, do not apply sunscreen until the area has healed.
• Swimming in salt water or chlorinated swimming pools and hot tubs. If you swim as exercise, ask your doctor if you may continue during treatment.
• Putting any deodorants, cosmetics or perfumes on treated skin. Use only creams, ointments and powders recommended by Radiation Oncology. You may use any products you choose on skin that is not being treated, just be careful to keep them away from the treated skin.
• Shaving the 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 recommendations.

If you get blisters and/or bleeding, it may take several weeks for the skin to heal completely. Some color change may be permanent. Please be patient – this area almost always heals on its own and the doctors and nurses in Radiation Oncology will tell you what to do to help it heal.

Even after your treatments are done, the skin that was treated will remain more sensitive to heat, cold and sunburn than untreated skin. Make sure you protect it correctly with clothing and sunscreen, SPF 15 or above.