

Effects on Skin and Nails

You may have minor skin problems while you are having chemotherapy. Possible side effects include redness, itching, peeling, dryness, and acne. Your nails may become brittle, darkened, or cracked. They also may develop vertical lines or bands.

You will be able to take care of most of these problems yourself. If you develop acne, try to keep your face clean and dry and use over-the-counter medicated creams or soaps. For itching, apply cornstarch as you would a dusting powder. To help avoid dryness, take quick showers or sponge baths rather than long, hot tub-baths. Apply cream and lotion while your skin is still moist and avoid perfume, cologne, or aftershave lotion that contains alcohol. You can strengthen your nails with the remedies sold for this purpose, but be alert to signs of a worsening problem because these products can be irritating to some people. Protect your nails by wearing gloves when washing dishes, gardening, or performing other work around the house. Get further advice from your doctor if these skin and nail problems don't respond to your efforts. Be sure to let your doctor know if you have redness, pain, or changes around the cuticles.

Certain anticancer drugs, when given intravenously, may produce a fairly dramatic darkening of the skin all along the vein. Some people use makeup to cover the area, but this can become difficult and time-consuming if several veins are affected, which sometimes happens. The darkened areas usually will fade on their own a few months after treatment ends.

Exposure to the sun may increase the effects some anticancer drugs have on your skin. Check with your doctor or nurse about using a sunscreen lotion with a skin protection factor (SPF) of 15 to protect against the sun's effects. They may even suggest that you avoid being in direct sunlight or that you use a product, such as zinc oxide, that blocks the sun's rays completely. Long-sleeve cotton shirts, hats, and pants also will block the sun.

Some people who have had radiation therapy develop "radiation recall" during their chemotherapy. During or shortly after anticancer drugs are given, the skin over the area that was treated with radiation turns red—a shade anywhere from light to very bright—and may itch or burn. This reaction may last hours or even days. You can soothe the itching and burning by putting a cool, wet compress over the affected area. Radiation recall reactions should be reported to your doctor or nurse.

Most skin problems are not serious, but a few demand immediate attention. For example, certain drugs given intravenously can cause serious and permanent tissue damage if they leak out of the vein. Tell your doctor or nurse right away if you feel any burning or pain when you are getting IV drugs. These symptoms don't always mean there's a problem but they always must be checked out at once.

You also should let your doctor or nurse know right away if you develop sudden or severe itching, if your skin breaks out in a rash or hives, or if you have wheezing or any other trouble breathing. These symptoms may mean you are having an allergic reaction that may need to be treated at once.

Acne

Try to keep your face clean and dry. Ask your doctor or nurse if you can use over-the-counter medicated creams or soaps.

Itching and dryness

Apply cornstarch as you would a dusting powder.

To help avoid dryness, take quick showers or sponge baths. Do not take long, hot baths.

Use a moisturizing soap.

Apply cream and lotion while your skin is still moist. Avoid perfume, cologne, or aftershave lotion that contains alcohol.

Use a colloid oatmeal bath or diphenhydramine for generalized pruritis.

Nail problems

You can buy nail-strengthening products in a drug store. Be aware that these products may bother your skin and nails.

Protect your nails by wearing gloves when washing dishes, gardening, or doing other work around the house.

Be sure to let your doctor know if you have redness, pain, or changes around the cuticles.

Sunlight sensitivity

Avoid direct sunlight as much as possible, especially between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. ***when the sun's rays are the strongest.***

Use a sun screen lotion with a skin protection factor (SPF) of 15 or higher to protect against sun damage. A product such as zinc oxide, sold over the counter, can block the sun's rays completely.

Use a lip balm with a sun protection factor.

Wear long-sleeve cotton shirts, pants and hats with a wide brim (particularly if you are having hair loss), to block the sun.

Even people with dark skin need to protect themselves from the sun during chemotherapy.

Radiation Recall

Some people who have had radiation therapy develop "radiation ***recall***" ***during their chemotherapy. During or shortly after certain anticancer drugs are given, the skin over an area that had received radiation turns red. The skin may blister and peel. This reaction may last hours or even days. Report radiation recall reactions to your doctor or nurse. You can soothe the itching and burning by:***

Placing a cool, wet compress over the affected area.

Wearing soft, non-irritating fabrics. Women who have radiation for breast cancer following lumpectomy often find cotton bras the most comfortable.