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Rashes and Skin Changes

Skin changes, especially rashes, are one of the most common side effects of many cancer treatments. These changes can affect skin anywhere on your body, including your scalp. Skin changes and rashes may also be called **cutaneous** or **dermatologic reactions**.

There may be treatments available, depending on your symptoms and what is causing them.

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What causes rashes and skin changes?

There are many reasons you might have rashes or other skin changes during cancer and cancer treatment.

Cancer treatments

Cancer treatments are the most common cause of rashes and skin changes in people with cancer. Most types of cancer treatment (including chemo, targeted drug therapy, immunotherapy, radiation therapy, stem cell transplant, and hormone therapy) can cause skin changes.

Medications

Many other types of medications used as part of cancer treatment (such as ones for pain, nausea and vomiting, or diarrhea) can cause skin changes.

It's important to know that if a skin rash is an expected side effect of a certain treatment, it is not considered an allergy or allergic reaction. However, people *can* have allergies to chemotherapy, immunotherapy, and targeted drug therapy, just like with any other medicine.

Talk to your doctor or cancer care team about your symptoms. They can help you understand what type of reaction you might be having.

Certain cancers

Rashes and skin changes can also be caused by certain cancers. For example, itchiness and night sweats can be symptoms of some lymphomas. Some leukemias and breast cancers can cause rashes.

Other health problems

Other health conditions not related to cancer can also cause rashes or skin changes, such as psoriasis or [cellulitis](#)¹.

Common rashes caused by cancer treatment

Rashes can be a side effect of certain types of chemotherapy, targeted drug therapy, immunotherapy, radiation therapy, or [stem cell \(bone marrow\) transplants](#)².

These are some of the most common rashes caused by cancer treatment:

Maculopapular

Maculopapular rashes have both flat and raised areas. They often look like pink-red bumps on light skin tones and purple-brown bumps on dark skin tones. Maculopapular rashes most often happen on the face, chest, stomach, and back, but they can develop on any area. Some are itchy or uncomfortable.

Papulopustular

affect your mucous membranes (areas such as the mouth, throat, colon, or genitals).

SJS and TEN are medical emergencies. If you think you might have SJS or TEN, go to the emergency room or call 911 immediately.

Other common skin changes

You might see other skin changes because of your cancer treatment including dry or itchy skin, wounds or scars, and skin color changes.

Dry skin

Dry skin can be rough, flaky, red, and sometimes painful. It is often caused by not having enough oil and water in the layers of your skin. Common causes of dry skin include [dehydration](#)⁴, heat, cold, or poor nutrition. Dry skin can be a side effect of cancer treatments like chemotherapy, radiation therapy, targeted therapy, and stem cell transplant.

Itchy skin

Itching is usually an uncomfortable feeling that can lead to poor sleep, anxiety, abrasions or wounds, and [infection](#)⁵. The medical name for itching is **pruritus**. Certain cancer treatments, medicines, skin conditions, or other health problems can cause itching.

Skin color changes

Changes in skin color can happen in any person for different reasons. The medical name for skin color changes is **cutaneous pigmentation**. Changes in skin color can be caused by different types of cancer treatments or medicines.

They can also be a sign of another health concern. For example, yellow skin can be a sign of liver problems; pale or blue lips can be a sign of breathing problems; bruised skin can be a sign of [low blood counts](#)⁶ or bleeding.

Photosensitivity

Certain treatments and medicines can cause your skin to be more sensitive to light. This is known as photosensitivity.

Radiation dermatitis

Almost everyone receiving radiation therapy experiences some degree of radiation dermatitis (skin irritation that may be red, dry, itchy, or peeling). It usually happens only on skin in the area getting radiation. It may be mild or severe depending on the dose of radiation therapy and what area is being treated.

Radiation recall

Radiation recall is a rare side effect that happens to some people who receive chemotherapy after having radiation therapy. While not well understood, some people experience a skin reaction (dermatitis) in the area previously treated with radiation. Radiation recall can happen weeks, months, or years after getting radiation therapy.

Wounds and scars

Skin conditions that aren't managed, surgical procedures, and complications such as [pressure sores](#)⁷ can cause wounds and scars.

Learn more: [Scars and Wounds](#)⁸

Signs and symptoms

Rashes and other skin changes can show up on your scalp, face, neck, chest, upper back, and sometimes on other parts of your body. Rashes can itch, burn, sting, or be painful. Most rashes and skin changes develop within a few weeks of cancer treatment, but they can happen at any time.

Signs and symptoms include:

- Pain, discomfort, or skin sensitivity
- Dry, rough, scaly, or flaky skin
- Redness or swelling
- Pink, red, or purple spots that can be different sizes and patterns
- Cracked skin or nails
- Excessive scratching or scratch marks
- Sores or ulcers
- Yellowing of the skin or the whites of eyes

Not all skin changes need to be treated. But if you have symptoms that are severe or don't go away, you might get one or more of the following treatments.

Topical therapies

Topical therapies are the most common treatment for rashes and other skin changes, such as dryness or itchiness. A topical therapy is any treatment that is applied to the skin. This includes moisturizers, steroid creams, or other anti-inflammatory ingredients.

Steroids

Steroids are often used for rashes or skin changes caused by immunotherapy, targeted drug therapy, or stem cell transplant because they calm down the immune system reaction.

Immunotherapy

For very severe rashes that don't respond to other treatments, certain types of immunotherapy can help suppress an overactive immune system.

Antibiotics

If you have a very severe rash or skin problem, or if you have signs or symptoms of infection, your health care team might suggest antibiotics to prevent infection. Antibiotics can be topical (applied to your skin), oral (pills that you swallow), or intravenous (through an IV in your vein).

Other therapies

Other treatments and therapies might be used, depending on your symptoms. For example, if you have itching that doesn't respond to creams or steroids, you might be given medications such as antihistamines. Cool cloths can help with itching that d

chemicals. (Perfumes and harsh chemicals can irritate your skin or even make your symptoms worse.)

Here are some ways you can take care of your skin and prevent skin changes from getting worse:

Keep it clean. Wash the affected area at least once a day with gentle soap and warm water. Pat dry.

Keep it moisturized. Unless you're told otherwise, keep the area moisturized. Use a hypoallergenic, cream-based moisturizer such as Vanicream, Aveeno, CeraVe, or Eucerin.

Use clean, dry clothes and towels. Don't share with other people.

Protect the affected area from extremely hot or cold temperatures.

Protect your skin from the sun and ultraviolet (UV) radiation. Use a broad-spectrum sunscreen with SPF of at least 30 and zinc oxide or titanium dioxide. Apply it at least 1 hour before going outside. Wear sunglasses with UV protection. Wear a hat or head covering to protect your scalp.

Avoid irritating the area as it heals. Wear loose, soft, comfortable clothing and shoes. Avoid tight clothing, very hot water, and products without strong perfumes or irritating chemicals.

Try to avoid scratching or injury to the area. This can make rashes and skin problems worse, break open skin, and increase your risk of infection and bleeding.

Avoid products with alcohol such as perfumes, colognes, and aftershave.

Use an electric razor to reduce your risk of damage or injury to skin.

Soothe irritated skin. If you have itchy or irritated skin, try soaks with baking soda, oatmeal, or bath oil.

[Hair, Skin, and Nail Problems](#) ⁹

Cancer and cancer treatment can cause changes to your skin, nails, and hair (including hair loss). Learn what to look for and how to manage your symptoms.

[Managing Cancer-related Side Effects](#) ¹⁰

Learn more about common side effects that can be caused by cancer and cancer

Written by
