



## A Patient's Guide to Skin Care during and after Radiotherapy at Mount Vernon Cancer Centre

Patient Information Series No 11

### Consent

It is a legal requirement to have a signed Consent Form from you before the start of your treatment.

If you have already been given one of these forms, please bring the completed form with you when you come for your first appointment.

If you have not been given a form, this will be discussed with you at your first appointment.

### Identification

Please note that it is a legal requirement for the staff to check your name and details against your treatment sheet every time you attend.

This leaflet has been written in collaboration with oncologists, health professionals, patients and carers at Mount Vernon Cancer Centre.

If you have difficulty reading this size of print, a version of this leaflet or any of our leaflets can be produced for you in a larger print.

## A Patient's Guide to Skin Care during and after Radiotherapy at Mount Vernon Cancer Centre

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### Introduction

This leaflet explains how to care for your skin during and after your radiotherapy. It is for all patients receiving external radiotherapy or radiotherapy using an electron beam at the Mount Vernon Cancer Centre.

You will probably know which treatment(s) you are having, but the radiographers will explain which sections of this leaflet apply to you.

Although this information cannot deal with every issue, we hope it will answer the most commonly asked questions about caring for your skin. However, if anything is unclear, please feel free to talk to the oncologist<sup>1</sup> or radiographers treating you.

### External beam radiotherapy

This is the most usual type of radiotherapy and is given from a machine called a linear accelerator which directs radiation to a specific part of your body. This beam will pass through your skin to treat the relevant site within your body, and exit through your skin on the other side.

If you are unclear, ask the radiographers to explain where the beams enter your body and where they exit.

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this leaflet the term 'oncologist' will refer to both your cancer specialist and any doctors working within his/her team.

## Electron therapy

This treatment is also given from a linear accelerator. It is suitable for patients who need treatment to sites just below the skin surface, penetrating just a few centimetres, rather than deep into the tissues.

The skin and general area may become sore, but don't worry as this is to be expected and, although it may continue to get worse for 10-14 days after the treatment is over, it will then get better.

## Am I allowed to wash throughout my treatment?

Yes. You can wash throughout your treatment, but be gentle in the area you are having treated. Wash this area with plain water and 'Simple' soap, baby soap, unperfumed shower gel or some aqueous cream. Dry your skin carefully by patting it, please don't rub it.

## Am I allowed to put anything on the treated area?

The radiographers will give you a tube of aqueous cream, which you should put on your skin twice daily during your treatment. Just apply the cream to your skin - please don't be tempted to rub it in.

If your skin gets very sore or the skin breaks, the radiographers or nurses will give you extra advice on what to do.

Please don't put any other creams or lotions on the treated area until your skin has completely healed.

## Tip!

Try keeping the aqueous cream in the fridge. The cooling effect is very soothing.



Aqueous cream can be applied more than twice a day if required. The only stipulation is it should not be applied immediately before treatment, as it needs to have time to be absorbed.

## Am I allowed to shave during my treatment?

This will depend on the part of your body you are having treated. If you need to shave a part of your body which is receiving treatment, the general advice would be to use an electric razor, rather than wet shave.

However, it is always best to ask the radiographers for their advice in your particular case.

## What will happen to the skin in the treated area?

Your skin reaction will depend on the part of your body receiving treatment, the dose of radiation you are given and the length of your course of treatment.

Some patients will not experience a skin reaction at all, and this is fine. The skin reaction is not an indication of how well the treatment has worked.

A moderate skin reaction will settle down within 10 - 14 days. A more severe reaction may require dressings, and in this case the skin may take 4 - 8 weeks to heal.

Severe reactions are rare. It will depend on the area being treated and the type of treatment being delivered. If a severe reaction is expected in your case, you will be warned at the start of your treatment.

### **Am I allowed to wash my hair during my treatment?**

If you have had a part of your body treated, there is no problem with washing your hair.

If you have had your face or head treated, you will need to take special care when shampooing your hair. Use a mild shampoo.

Please be advised that a baby shampoo tends to dry the hair, and medicated shampoo can be harsh on the scalp. We recommend you avoid these types of shampoo.

If possible lean backwards rather than forwards when washing your hair to avoid getting shampoo on the treated area.

Allow your hair to dry naturally. It is best not to use a hair dryer, as your skin may already feel very dry and your scalp will be more sensitive to the heat.

### **What if the treated area is near my eye?**

If the treated area is near your eye, you may find that your eyelids stick together, especially first thing in the morning.

To ease this when you wake, you can bathe your eyelids with cool tap water and gauze. Use a separate piece of gauze for each eye.

If it persists ask your doctor to prescribe some lubricating eye ointment. If your eye continues to discharge, then antibiotics may be required. If you normally wear contact lenses or use eye drops you must speak with your doctor for specific advice.

### **What else should I be careful about during treatment?**

- Don't put anything such as bath salts, bubble baths or oils in the bath water for the duration of your treatment.
- Don't use perfume, talcum powder or deodorant on the treatment area.
- If the treatment area is on your face, don't put any face creams, make-up, perfumes or aftershaves on it at all during this time.
- Don't use heat of any kind such as a hot water bottle on the treated area. This applies to skin where the treatment entered your body and the area where it left your body. If you are unclear, ask the radiographers to explain this to you.
- Don't expose these skin areas to the sun or wind until all the redness has gone. Even then, it is always advisable to use a high factor sunscreen or a sun block on your skin.

Remember the treated area will always be more sensitive and tender than untreated skin.

### **A healthy tip!**

Keep out of the sun especially during the hottest part of the day, noon to 3pm. Always use a high factor sunscreen or a sun block.

Wear a hat and protect yourself with clothing. This has nothing to do with your radiotherapy, it is just good sense.



### **Am I allowed to take painkillers?**

The skin reactions are not usually that painful. However, if you do feel you need something for the pain, it is usually all right to take your normal painkillers. If the skin irritates and there appears to be a rash, then it is safe to take antihistamine. Please ask your nurse, doctor, or clinic radiographer if you are unsure.

### **What about my clothing?**

Try to wear loose clothing made of a natural fibre, such as cotton against your skin. Tight clothing around the treated area can cause friction which can make the skin become sore. Cotton is better than nylon as it allows your skin to remain cool and is more absorbent.

### **What about washing when my treatment is over?**

When your treatment is over, carry on with the washing advice given to you during your treatment.

If you have been given aqueous cream, you should continue to apply it each day until your skin is no longer uncomfortable. You can obtain this from your local pharmacy if you need more.

Once your skin feels comfortable, you may resume your usual washing routine.

### **What are the long term effects on the skin?**

This can vary. The skin in the treated area may have a different texture or colour compared to the normal skin. The majority of people have no long-term effects, but we are unable to predict how each individual will react.

If you have any concerns relating to your skin in the treated area, then please call the radiotherapy clinic nurses or clinic radiographers (see page 11).

### **Additional help and support**

The Lynda Jackson Macmillan Centre (see back page) can provide additional help and information including leaflets on skin care in the sun.

We all need some help now and again, so if anything about your treatment worries you, please call the Centre and they will do their best to help you or find someone who can.

Other leaflets which you may find useful:

- Cancer Support Groups
- Look Good Feel Better™
- Guide to Complementary Therapies
- Coping now Radiotherapy is Finishing
- Breast Prostheses and Bras

### Checklist for you to complete

Your oncologist is Dr: .....

Your hospital number is: .....

Your treatment start date: .....

The length of your course of treatment: .....

Radiotherapy clinic nurses: ..... 01923 844267

Radiotherapy Clinic Radiographers: ..... 01923 844548



This leaflet forms part of a series of publications produced by the Lynda Jackson Macmillan Centre (LJMC).

If you would like further information about any aspect of cancer and its treatments, please drop in to the centre or call the Helpline.

The LJMC is staffed by healthcare professionals and trained volunteers and is part of the Mount Vernon Cancer Centre.

- ◇ Drop-in centre for support and information
- ◇ Telephone Helpline
- ◇ Benefits Advice \*
- ◇ Pre-treatment visits
- ◇ Complementary therapies \*
- ◇ Relaxation classes
- ◇ Counselling \*
- ◇ Support groups
- ◇ Look Good...Feel Better™ beauty workshops

\* These services are available to patients under the care of an NHS oncologist based at Mount Vernon Cancer Centre.

Opening hours: Mon - Fri: 9.30am - 1.00pm & 2.00 - 4.30pm

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