

## Scalp Irritation

Radiation therapy to the head can cause hair loss and skin irritation within the treatment area. For patients receiving 1 to 2 months of radiation therapy, these changes typically begin after about 2 weeks of radiation, but can begin sooner or later, and can worsen over the course of the radiation treatment. For patients receiving a week or less of radiation therapy, these skin changes can happen 1 to 3 weeks after radiation finishes. The skin reaction to radiation therapy is often similar to the reaction that occurs from exposure to the sun. Redness, tenderness, and pain can occur. Some patients develop a rash or itching. Occasionally blistering or weeping of the skin can occur. In patients receiving radiation therapy to the head, the most common spot for blistering or weeping is in the crease behind the ear. The skin heals after radiation therapy is complete, usually over a period of 2 to 4 weeks. The skin that received radiation may return completely to normal, but some patients always have some discoloration, tightness, or dryness of the skin.

Hair loss can be temporary or permanent, depending on the dose of radiation therapy. When hair regrowth occurs, it usually takes 3 to 6 months. Hair can sometimes return a different color or consistency, or can be thinner than it was before radiation.

### **Ways to manage scalp irritation:**

- Gently wash hair with mild shampoo and lukewarm water 1 to 2 times per week. Do not rub, scrub, or scratch. Dry with a soft towel by patting, not rubbing, the scalp.
- Use a head covering (such as a hat or scarf) to protect scalp from wind, cold, and sun. Do not use hats that are tight or do not breathe.
- When outdoors, apply a sunscreen with an SPF 15 or more on the face and scalp and cover with a shading hat.
- If hair loss occurs, use a moisturizing ointment or lotion on the affected area of the scalp two to three times per day. Avoid skin products with fragrance. Your doctor or nurse can give you a list of recommended products. Do not apply ointments or lotions immediately prior to your daily radiation treatment. The skin of the scalp should be clean and dry during the treatment. If the scalp does not feel dry just before radiation treatment, gently wash it and pat it dry. If you are unsure what area of the scalp is affected by the radiation treatment, check with your therapist.
- Avoid using anything on the scalp that is very hot or cold. Do not use ice packs, heating pads, or other products that are hot or cold directly on the skin.
- Use a soft-bristle brush to reduce stress on the hair shaft.
- DO NOT use cornstarch, perfume, powder, hair removers, sunscreen or zinc oxide unless approved by your doctor or nurse.



- Avoid hair dyes and permanents during radiation therapy, and for several months after therapy (until the scalp has healed).
- DO NOT USE tanning booths.
- Follow the skin care management instructions that you are given by your doctor or nurse.

**Suggested ointments and lotions are listed below:**

- Aquaphor
- Biafine (active ingredient trolamine)
- Alra Therapy Lotion
- Remedy Skin Repair Cream
- Elta creme
- Glucan Professional Moisturizing Cream
- Udder cream
- AloePlex Gel
- RadiaPlex Gel
- Xclair.
- Miaderm Radiation Relief.
- Cetaphil moisturizing lotion or cream
- Aveeno daily moisturizing lotion