

YOUR TREATMENT TOOLKIT

Skin Cancer Radiotherapy
Supportive Care Guide

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Evidence-based protocols from NCCN, ASTRO, and clinical practice guidelines

Welcome

You have been diagnosed with skin cancer and your radiation oncology team has recommended radiotherapy. Skin cancer radiation is typically **short and highly effective**, with excellent cosmetic outcomes in most cases.

This guide contains evidence-based protocols to protect your skin, manage side effects, and optimize healing. **Read it. Follow it. Ask questions.**

About Your Treatment

- Skin cancer RT is often chosen when surgery is not ideal (location, size, cosmesis, patient health status)
- Treatment is typically **SHORT**: 2–6 weeks depending on technique
- Common types treated: basal cell carcinoma (BCC), squamous cell carcinoma (SCC), Merkel cell carcinoma
- Electron beam or superficial RT for most skin cancers
- Side effects are **LOCAL** (limited to treatment area) and temporary

Treatment Timeline

Phase	Timeline	What to Expect
Setup	Week 1	Minimal redness. Start skin care routines.
Ramp Up	Weeks 2–4	Darkening, dryness, peeling, itching.
Peak	Weeks 4–6	Possible blistering, moist desquamation (raw skin), crusting.
Recovery	2–6 weeks post	Continues to worsen 1–2 weeks, then heals over 2–6 weeks.

The Golden Rules

1. The Treatment Area Will Get Worse Before It Gets Better

Expect redness, peeling, and even blistering. This is the treatment working, not a problem. The area will look worst at the **END** of treatment and for 1–2 weeks after. This is normal.

2. Keep It Clean, Keep It Moist

Gentle washing and moisturizing prevent infection and speed healing. Dry skin = slower healing.

3. Protect From Sun Permanently

Treated skin is **permanently sun-sensitive**. SPF 50+ for life, or cover with clothing.

4. Patience During Healing

Full cosmetic healing takes 2–6 months. Some treated areas heal beautifully; others may have subtle permanent color change or texture difference.

Section 1 — Skin Care During Treatment (THE KEY SECTION)

What Your Skin Will Look Like

- **Weeks 1–2:** Mild redness (like sunburn). Mild warmth. No pain.
- **Weeks 2–4:** Darkening, dryness, peeling, itching intensify.
- **Weeks 4–6:** Possible blistering, moist desquamation (raw, weeping skin), crusting. Looks like a severe burn.
- **Post-treatment:** Continues to worsen for 1–2 weeks. Then heals over 2–6 weeks.

Daily Skin Care Routine

Wash:

- Lukewarm water only, or very mild cleanser (Dove Sensitive, Cetaphil)
- Use hands only — **NO washcloths, sponges, or scrubbing**
- Pat dry gently. Do not rub.

Moisturize:

- Apply 2–3 times daily. Recommended: **Aquaphor, Eucerin, CeraVe**, or prescribed cream
- OK to apply before treatment (old “nothing before RT” rule is outdated)
- Petroleum-based products are BEST for healing

Avoid:

- Perfume, cologne, aftershave, alcohol-based products
- Makeup on treatment area
- Picking, peeling, or scratching. Do NOT pop blisters.
- Adhesive bandages on treated skin

Shaving & Clothing:

- Shaving: Electric razor only near treatment area
- Clothing: Loose, soft fabrics over treated area. Avoid friction.

When Skin Breaks Down (Moist Desquamation)

This is common and expected, especially with longer courses or high-dose RT. It is **not an infection** — it is radiation effect.

- **What it looks like:** Raw, weeping, blistered skin (like a severe burn)
- **What to do:** Tell your nurse immediately. Keep the area **MOIST** (dry = slower healing)

Prescribed wound care (if needed):

- Silver sulfadiazine cream: Apply thin layer 1–2x daily
- Xeroform gauze or non-adherent dressings for weeping areas
- Hydrogel dressings for comfort and moisture retention
- Mepilex foam for advanced wound care

Do NOT use:

- Hydrogen peroxide, alcohol, or iodine on the wound
- Adhesive bandages

When to call your nurse:

- Increasing pain with spreading redness/warmth (possible infection)
- Foul smell or purulent drainage
- Fever

Section 2 — Cosmetic Outcomes & Healing Timeline

Patients understandably worry about appearance. Here are realistic expectations.

Timeline

Timepoint	Appearance
End of treatment	Often worst appearance: red, raw, swollen, crusted
2–4 weeks post	Scabbing and crusting typically begin resolving
1–3 months post	Pink new skin usually visible, sensitive, gradually normalizing
3–6 months post	Color often blends with surrounding skin; scar is usually subtle
12+ months post	Most areas achieve good cosmetic results, though healing varies by location and individual

Factors Affecting Cosmesis

- **Location:** Nose, ear, eyelid, and lip heal differently than flat areas
- **Skin tone:** Darker skin may have more hyperpigmentation post-RT
- **Treatment dose & technique:** Higher doses may leave more visible scars
- **Patient age & healing:** Younger patients typically heal faster

Long-Term Skin Changes

Treated skin may be **permanently**:

- Thinner and more fragile
- Sun-sensitive (requires SPF 50+ forever)
- Slightly different color or texture (usually subtle, often acceptable)

Section 3 — Pain Management

Pain from skin cancer RT is usually **MILD** — much less painful than other sites. Most patients manage with over-the-counter medications.

Pain Ladder

Level	Treatment
Mild	Tylenol (acetaminophen) 500–1000 mg every 6 hours
Moderate	Topical lidocaine cream if prescribed for sensitive areas (lip, nose, eyelid)
Severe (rare)	Call us. Stronger options available.

Important:

- **Avoid aspirin/ibuprofen** unless approved — can increase bleeding in healing tissue
- Pain meds OK to take before treatment if you anticipate discomfort

Section 4 — Sun Protection (CRITICAL — Lifelong)

Treated skin is **PERMANENTLY more sensitive to UV damage**. This is non-negotiable.

Daily sun protection:

- **SPF 50+ sunscreen** on treated area every day, even in winter, even on cloudy days
- Reapply every 2 hours if outdoors
- Wide-brim hat if face/scalp treated
- UV-protective clothing for body sites
- **NO tanning beds** — ever

Your recurrence risk:

You have already had skin cancer once. **Your risk of a SECOND skin cancer is high.** Annual full-body skin exams for life. For patients with advanced squamous cell carcinoma (cSCC), newer immunotherapy options such as cemiplimab may be available. Ask your oncologist if this applies to

you. Watch for new growths, non-healing sores, or changes in existing moles.

Section 5 — Special Considerations by Location

Face: Eye protection shields during treatment. Tear duct irritation possible. Nasolabial fold reactions common. Keep area very moist. May need extra padding.

Ear: Cartilage can be sensitive. Avoid sleeping on treated ear. Custom bolus material may help. Healing typically very good cosmetically.

Scalp: Hair loss in treatment field is common (usually regrows). Gentle shampoo. Use mild soap only. Avoid harsh products or heat styling.

Nose: Inside of nostril may be irritated. Saline nasal spray helps. Crusting is normal. Do not pick or blow hard.

Lip: Avoid spicy, acidic foods, and very hot foods. Use lip balm (Aquaphor). Swelling is temporary and usually resolves.

Hands/Feet: May affect grip or walking temporarily. Loose gloves/socks help. Skin is thinner here so extra care needed.

Eyelid: Ophthalmology involvement. Eye drops for dryness. Shield during treatment mandatory. Eyelid healing can take longer. Your team may use a special protective shield during treatment to help protect the eye.

Section 6 — Daily Life & Fatigue

Fatigue from skin cancer RT is usually **MINIMAL** — much less than other radiation sites. Most patients continue normal daily activities during treatment.

What to Expect

- **Energy:** Most patients report no significant fatigue. Some tire easily after longer appointments.
- **Driving:** Usually safe unless face/eye treatment causes vision issues
- **Exercise:** Generally fine. Protect treated area from sweat irritation.
- **Work:** Most patients continue working during treatment
- **Rest:** Especially if elderly or treating large areas, allow extra rest time

Section 7 — Emotional Support

Skin cancer on visible areas (face, ears, nose) can affect self-image. **This is normal and temporary.**

If Anxious About Appearance

- Ask to see photos of other patients' healing process
- Cosmetic outcome is usually very good — the area looks worst at the END of treatment
- Healing continues for months — patience pays off

Support Resources

- Skin Cancer Foundation: skincancer.org
- American Academy of Dermatology: aad.org
- Ask your team about support groups or counseling

You are NOT radioactive. It is safe to be close to family, partners, children, and pets throughout your treatment.

Red Flags: When to Call Us

Call us immediately if you experience any of the following:

Symptom	Why It Matters
Increasing pain with spreading redness/warmth	Possible infection
Fever over 100.4°F	Infection
Foul-smelling drainage from treatment area	Infection
Bleeding that doesn't stop with gentle pressure	Needs evaluation
Eye pain or vision changes (if face treated)	URGENT — ophthalmology needed
Rapid swelling of treated area	Possible reaction or infection
New lump near treatment area	Needs evaluation
Black or necrotic tissue	Needs wound care evaluation

Long-Term Follow-Up

Treatment ending is not the end of your care. These are lifelong considerations.

Skin Surveillance

Annual full-body skin exams for life. Follow-up frequency depends on your cancer type. For BCC: every 6-12 months for 5 years, then at least annually for life. For SCC: every 3-12 months for 2 years, every 6-12 months for the next 3 years, then annually. You are at higher risk for second skin cancers. Watch treated area for:

- Any new growth or thickening
- Non-healing sore or ulcer
- New lump or nodule near the treatment area
- Changes in color, texture, or size

Permanent Sun Protection

High-SPF sunscreen (SPF 50+) on treated area for life. This is one of the most important things you can do for your skin.

Rare Late Effects

- **Skin thinning:** Treated area may remain thinner, more fragile
- **Telangiectasia:** Visible blood vessels may develop (usually subtle)
- **Soft tissue fibrosis:** Rare; treated area may become firmer over time

Recommended Products

Below are commonly recommended products. These are suggestions, not endorsements — equivalent brands work fine.

Category	Product	Cost	Link
Skin Care	Aquaphor Healing Ointment	~\$12	amazon.com/s?k=Aquaphor+Healing+Ointment
Skin Care	Eucerin Original (lighter option)	~\$10	amazon.com/s?k=Eucerin+Original+Healing+Cream
Skin Care	CeraVe Moisturizing Cream	~\$12	amazon.com/s?k=CeraVe+Moisturizing+Cream
Wound Care	Silver sulfadiazine (Rx)	Rx	prescribed by doctor
Wound Care	Xeroform gauze pads	~\$15	amazon.com
Wound Care	Non-adherent pads	~\$8	amazon.com
Sun Protection	SPF 50+ facial sunscreen	~\$15	amazon.com
Sun Protection	Wide-brim hat	~\$20	amazon.com
Sun Protection	UV-protective clothing	~\$30–100	REI, Amazon, specialty outdoor
Pain	Tylenol Extra Strength	~\$8	amazon.com
Lip Care	Aquaphor Lip Repair	~\$5	amazon.com
Scalp	Baby shampoo (gentle)	~\$5	amazon.com
Scalp	Silk pillowcase	~\$20	amazon.com

Prescription items (Silver sulfadiazine, topical lidocaine) will be sent to your pharmacy by your care team.

Important Contact Information

Main Line Health — Radiation Oncology

100 East Lancaster Ave · Rosengarten Bldg, Basement · Wynnewood, PA 19096

1078 West Baltimore Pike · Health Center 1, Ground Floor · Media, PA 19063

Phone

Appointment Line: 1.866.CALL.MLH (1.866.225.5654)

If you are experiencing a life-threatening emergency, call 911.

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My Treatment Journal

A place to notice patterns, remember questions, and track what helps.

You do not need to fill this out perfectly. Even a few notes can help you see patterns, remember what worked, and tell your care team what is actually happening at home.

This Week

Week of / goals / anything I especially want help with

Daily Check-In

Day / Date	Energy (0-10)	Pain (0-10)	Eating / Drinking	Sleep	Main note
Mon					
Tue					
Wed					
Thu					
Fri					
Sat					
Sun					

Symptoms I Want to Watch

<input type="checkbox"/> Skin redness	<input type="checkbox"/> Peeling / open skin	<input type="checkbox"/> Drainage / crusting
<input type="checkbox"/> Pain / tenderness	<input type="checkbox"/> Cosmetics / healing	<input type="checkbox"/> Fatigue
<input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____		

What I Tried / What Helped

Use this page to test small changes and keep track of what helps, what does not, and what you want to ask about next.

Problem or symptom	What I tried	Did it help?	Next step / question

Examples: taking pain medicine before meals, changing skin care timing, drinking earlier in the day, using a humidifier, adjusting fiber, walking after treatment, or asking for a refill.

Questions for My Care Team

Bring this page to visits. Small questions are worth writing down, especially when treatment days start to run together.

Symptoms or side effects I want to mention

Medication, refill, or product questions

Eating, drinking, bowel, bladder, skin, sleep, or activity questions

Logistics: appointments, transportation, work, family, forms

One thing I keep forgetting to ask
