

Dry, sore and itchy skin

Cancer treatments can affect how your skin looks and feels. These may include chemotherapy, radiotherapy, targeted therapies, immunotherapies and hormonal therapies. Depending on the [type of treatment](#) you have, and how you react to it, your skin may become dry, sore and itchy. Painkillers such as morphine and diamorphine can also cause itching. Some treatments can also make your skin more sensitive to the sun. Other treatments can cause a rash. If you develop a rash, always get it checked by your cancer doctor or specialist nurse straight away.

Itching can be caused by chemicals released by the cancer (especially some cancers of the blood). It can also be caused by kidney and liver problems, or [jaundice](#). Dry skin and itching can be a symptom of some types of cancer.

Dry skin can also be caused by a condition called [lymphoedema](#). Lymphoedema is a build-up of fluid in the tissues that can happen if the lymph glands (nodes) have been removed or damaged. Swelling can develop in the arms, legs and sometimes other parts of the body. The skin can feel tight, which can make it dry and crack easily.

Tell your doctor or specialist nurse if you have problems with your skin. There may be treatments to help. If you are having radiotherapy, targeted therapies, or immunotherapy, the staff at the hospital will advise you on how to care for your skin. Check with them before using any skin products.

Tips for managing dry, sore and itchy skin

- Wash with lukewarm water and mild, unperfumed, soap-free cleansers. Soap will make your skin drier.
- Avoid having long, hot showers or baths which will make your skin drier.
- Pat your skin dry instead of rubbing it. Use a clean, soft towel.
- Moisturise your skin regularly. This will keep it supple and less likely to become dry and itchy. Apply lotions, creams or ointments soon after you have washed. Follow the advice from your doctor or nurse.
- If you have dry or sore lips, use a lip balm. Choose one made from petroleum jelly (Vaseline®), shea butter or glycerine. Avoid petroleum jelly if you are having radiotherapy to the head or neck, or if you use oxygen.
- If you have dry skin, use a moisturiser at least twice a day on your face and body. You may need a richer moisturiser than you usually use. Avoid products containing sodium lauryl sulphate (SLS), especially if you have eczema. This can irritate the skin.
- Moisturisers containing oatmeal can be soothing for dry or sore skin. Try tying a muslin bag filled with oatmeal over your bath tap and letting the water run through.
- If your skin is very dry, it can become itchy. Try using an emollient or cream that contains oatmeal, menthol or 10% urea. This may help relieve the itchiness. Ask your cancer nurse specialist or oncology team for advice. They may prescribe you something to reduce itching.
- Protect yourself in the sun with sun cream that has a minimum factor SP30 and at least 4 UVA stars.
- If you are having radiotherapy to an area you normally shave, minimise the risk of cuts by using an electric shaver instead of wet-shaving.

Macmillan Cancer Support resources

We have more information on our [website](#), including audiobooks. Or you can order our free booklets and leaflets on be.macmillan.org.uk such as:

- [Body image and cancer](#)
- [Feel more like you](#)
- [Managing the symptoms of cancer](#)
- [Side effects of cancer treatment](#)
- [Understanding lymphoedema.](#)

We produce information in a [range of formats](#) and [languages](#). To order these, visit our website or call our support line.

Further Macmillan support

If you have more questions or would like to talk to someone, call the Macmillan Support Line free on **0808 808 00 00**, 7 days a week, 8am to 8pm. Or visit macmillan.org.uk where you can [chat to us online](#).

Deaf or hard of hearing? Call using NGT (Text Relay) on **18001 0808 808 00 00**, or use the NGT Lite app. Speak another language? Telephone interpreters are available. Please tell us in English the language you would like to use.

Or if you want to share your experiences or ask questions, you can find others who understand on our [Online Community](#).

Other useful contact details

- Look Good Feel Better – visit www.lookgoodfeelbetter.co.uk
- Skinship (UK) – visit www.skinshipuk.org
- Skin Support – visit www.skincareuk.org

Notes and questions
