



Caring for your  
**SKIN, NAILS,  
HAIR** and **MOUTH**



**WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW**

You or your loved one has been diagnosed with a type of blood cancer. Cancer treatments that destroy cancer cells can also affect your skin, nails, hair, and mouth. Good hygiene and personal care may help manage these side effects and improve your quality of life.

This fact sheet will help you:

- Learn about these side effects
- Find out how they can affect you
- Understand what you can do to manage them

## Your skin

Cancer treatments may cause skin side effects such as dry peeling skin, rashes, itching, and an increased risk of sunburn. Your doctor will let you know how to protect your skin, prevent infections, and reduce itching.

### How to take care of your skin

- Take a warm (not hot) bath or shower every day with mild, unscented soap-free cleanser or body wash.
- Pat your skin dry with a towel. Don't rub it.
- Apply unscented lotion after washing to prevent cracking in your skin.
- Use lip balm for dry or chapped lips.
- Avoid activities that put you at risk for cuts, injuries, or burns.
- Use an electric shaver to prevent razor cuts.
- Rinse cuts and scrapes right away under running water. Remove any debris from the wound.
- If you have a low platelet count and you are at risk for bleeding, ask your doctor how to care for cuts.
- Avoid direct sun when possible. Wear a broad-spectrum sunscreen with SPF 30 or higher. Reapply it every 2 hours or after swimming/sweating profusely. Find shade when possible and wear a hat.
- Use unscented gentle laundry detergent.

### Tell your doctor right away if you experience

- Sudden or severe itching, rash, or hives. These may be signs of an allergic reaction.
- Red, swollen, or tender skin and/or discharge from skin. Watch for signs around a wound, sore, rash, or intravenous (IV) catheter site. These could mean you have an infection.



## Your fingernails and toenails

Chemotherapy may cause your fingernails and toenails to darken, crack, or become brittle. You may develop white ridges or discoloured bands along the nails, or the nail bed becomes dark. You could also lose all or part of a fingernail or toenail. Nails usually grow back or return to normal after treatment ends. Tell your doctor about any changes to your nails, especially pain, redness, discoloration, odour, or discharge from under the nail. These could be signs of infection.

### How to take care of your nails and hands

- Keep your nails trimmed short.
- Do not bite your nails or pick at your cuticles.
- Wear cotton gloves when doing work with your hands.
- When washing dishes, use cotton-lined rubber gloves to keep your hands from becoming dry and irritated. Do not use unlined rubber gloves: they seal in sweat and irritate the skin.
- Avoid manicures, pedicures, and artificial nails, which may increase your risk of infection.
- Nail strengthener products can help protect nails. Use vegan nail polish, which has fewer chemical ingredients. To take off polish, use oily remover so your nails do not dry out.
- Soak your hands in natural oils (like olive oil) to relieve dryness.
- Wear loose-fitting shoes with cushioned cotton socks.

## Your hair

Some types of cancer treatments can cause your hair to fall out. Talk to your doctor about whether your treatment may cause hair loss so you will know what to expect.

### With chemotherapy, you may experience

- Hair loss ranging from thinning to baldness
- Hair loss that is sudden or slow
- Losing hair from other areas of your body, like your eyelashes, eyebrows, and pubic area


Hair typically begins to grow again after treatment. After treatment, your hair's thickness, texture, and colour may be different from before treatment.

### With radiation therapy, you may experience

- Hair loss that affects only the area that is being treated.
- Hair loss may be temporary or permanent.

With lower doses of radiation, hair loss is often temporary, and hair grows back. With very high doses of radiation, hair may grow back thinner or not at all in that spot.





### How to cope with hair loss

- Wash your hair and scalp every 2 to 4 days with a fragrance-free shampoo and conditioner. Rinse your hair well and pat it dry with a soft towel.
- Continue to comb or brush your hair, even if your hair starts to fall out.
- To remove tangles, use a soft-bristle brush, comb, or wet fingers. Gently comb hair at the ends and work your way up. Not combing or washing your hair will not prevent hair loss.
- Use a hat, scarf, cap, or bandana to keep your head warm and to protect your delicate scalp from sunburn.
- If your scalp is dry, use mineral oil or coconut oil on it.
- Avoid perms, chemical relaxers, hair dyes, bleach, and hairspray. These may damage hair and irritate the scalp.
- Do not use curlers, hair straighteners, or curling irons. The heat can damage your hair.
- Do not put your hair in braids, corn rows, or tight ponytails; all of these can cause breakage. Do not use clips or ties that hold the hair tightly.
- If you plan to wear a wig, see a wig stylist before you lose your hair so they can match the colour, style, and texture. Or save some pieces of your own hair and take them with you to the stylist.
- Ask your doctor to write you a prescription for a wig (your insurance may help cover the cost).
- You may want to get a short haircut or shave your head before hair loss begins.
- If you lose your eyebrows, you can draw them in with a makeup pencil.



### Your teeth and mouth

Side effects may include mouth sores, dry mouth, tooth decay, gum disease, and infections. These can make it difficult to eat, talk, chew, or swallow. This can affect your health and quality of life and may cause treatment delays.

Before treatment begins, try to visit the dentist to address any issues. Tell your doctor about bleeding gums or white patches in your mouth. Both can be signs of infection.

### How to take care of your teeth and mouth

- Brush your teeth with an extra-soft toothbrush and a mild fluoride toothpaste 2 or 3 times a day.
- Ask your doctor if it is okay to floss.
  - If your platelet count is low, flossing may increase the risk of bleeding.
  - If your white blood cell count is low, flossing may increase the risk of infection.
  - If your doctor approves, gently floss your teeth daily.

**How to take care of your teeth and mouth**  
(continued)

- Rinse your mouth several times a day with warm salt water or a mixture of baking soda and water.
- Do not use a mouthwash that contains alcohol. Alcohol can make a sore mouth worse.
- Keep your mouth moist by drinking water, sucking on ice chips or sugar-free hard candy, chewing sugarless gum, or using a saliva substitute.
- Wear dentures only for meals. Clean dentures well. Remove them when you are not eating to ease a sore mouth.
- Avoid smoking or using tobacco, which irritates the mouth.

**Graft-versus-host disease (GVHD)**

Graft-versus-host disease (GVHD) is a condition that might happen after an allogeneic stem cell transplant from a donor. Changes to the skin, nails, hair, and mouth can be symptoms of graft-versus-host disease. This is a potentially serious complication, so be sure to report these symptoms to your doctor.



Your healthcare team is there to support you throughout your treatment. Be sure to contact them if you have side effects so they can be managed quickly.

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**Never hesitate to contact us, we're here to help!**

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