

Potential Side Effects of Radiation Therapy for Nonmelanoma Skin Cancers: A Guide for Patients and Caregivers

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Introduction

There are different ways to treat nonmelanoma skin cancers, including surgery (the most common treatment) and radiation therapy. Radiation therapy uses high-energy rays to destroy cancer cells. This guide explains the potential side effects of radiation therapy for nonmelanoma skin cancers.

When is Radiation Therapy Used?

Radiation therapy can be a good option when surgery is not possible for functional or cosmetic reasons, especially for older adults or for cancers in tricky areas like the head and neck. It can also help when the cancer is too big, severe, or deep for surgery alone. It can be used after surgery as an additional treatment to destroy any remaining cancer cells and lower the risk of cancer returning. If cancer has spread to other parts of your body, radiation therapy may be used as well. Radiation treatments are often given over the course of several weeks.

Side Effects

Radiation therapy can cause side effects that may happen during treatment, immediately after, or months or years after completing treatment. The side effects depend on the area being treated, and usually do not affect the whole body.

One common side effect is radiation dermatitis. Symptoms may include:

- Pain

- Redness
- Swelling
- Burning
- Shrinking and wasting away of the skin
- Itching
- Ulcers
- Infections
- Changes in skin color

Other possible side effects include:

- Fatigue
- Swollen or damaged salivary glands
- Eye problems
- Hair loss
- Hearing loss
- Exposed bone
- Bone damage

These side effects may worsen with longer treatment. There may also be a higher risk of new skin cancers developing in areas previously treated by radiation, so radiation is typically not used for those who are young.

Managing Side Effects and Caring for Your Skin

Your healthcare team will tell you how to care for your skin during and after radiation therapy.

Let your physician know if you are experiencing any side effects from radiation therapy as soon as possible, so that they can suggest ways to help manage side effects. Most side effects go

away on their own after treatment is finished or the effects can be treated, but some may last a long time or become permanent.

Here are some tips to care for your skin after radiotherapy:

- Use mild lotions to keep the skin hydrated, but not right before treatment.
- Wash treated skin with lukewarm water and mild soap.
- Avoid extreme temperatures and sun exposure.
- Wear loose clothing.

If your side effects become worse, a temporary break from radiation therapy might be necessary.

Conclusion

Radiation therapy can be an effective treatment for NMSCs. It's important to talk with your doctor about the potential side effects and benefits to decide if it's the right choice for you.

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