

Blood Cancer NZ

EVERY BLOOD CANCER . EVERY PERSON . EVERY JOURNEY

Managing skin changes during and after blood cancer treatment

An information sheet for patients, families & whānau

Why does treatment affect my skin?

Many blood cancer treatments can affect the skin, hair, and nails. Chemotherapy, targeted therapies, immunotherapies, steroids, and stem cell transplants can all cause skin changes. While most are mild and manageable, some require prompt medical attention.

Common skin changes

You may experience:

- Dry, flaky, or rough skin
- Itching
- Redness or rash
- Increased sensitivity to sunlight
- Changes in skin colour
- Cracked skin, particularly on the hands and feet
- Nail changes, including brittleness or soreness around the nail bed, and changes in colour
- Blistering or peeling skin (less common but potentially serious)

Skin changes after a stem cell transplant (GvHD)

If you have received a donor (allogeneic) stem cell transplant, some skin changes may be caused by graft-versus-host disease (GvHD). This occurs when donor immune cells attack healthy tissues in the body.

Signs of skin GvHD may include:

- A red, itchy, or burning rash
- Dry, scaly skin
- Changes in skin colour
- Skin thickening or tightening
- Reduced flexibility around joints
- Changes to hair or nails

Always tell your transplant team about any new or worsening skin changes, as early treatment can help prevent complications.

Looking after your skin

Moisturise often

Keeping your skin well moisturised is one of the best ways to reduce dryness, itching, and irritation.

- Use a fragrance-free moisturiser designed for sensitive skin.
- Apply at least twice daily and after bathing.
- Use lip balm regularly if your lips become dry or cracked.

Bathe gently

- Use lukewarm rather than hot water.
- Keep showers and baths short.
- Limit showers or baths to no more than twice a day.
- Choose pH-balanced, fragrance-free cleansers. These are designed to be close to your skin's natural pH, helping to reduce dryness and irritation.
- Pat your skin dry rather than rubbing.

Protect your skin

- Wear loose, comfortable clothing.
- Avoid products containing perfumes, alcohol, or harsh exfoliants.
- Wear gloves when gardening or doing household chores.
- Avoid scratching itchy areas.

Protect yourself from the sun

Some blood cancer treatments and GvHD can make skin more sensitive to sunlight.

- Use SPF 50+ broad spectrum sunscreen on exposed skin.
- Wear a hat, sunglasses, and sun-protective clothing (UPF-rated).
- Seek shade when possible, particularly during the middle of the day. In summer, take extra care for a longer period when UV levels are high.

Managing common problems

Dry or itchy skin

- Moisturise regularly.
- Avoid hot long showers or baths.
- Wear soft cotton clothing.
- Ask your healthcare team about treatments if symptoms become troublesome.

Rashes

Some cancer treatments can cause rashes.

- Do not stop treatment without speaking to your healthcare team.
- Take photos of new rashes to help monitor changes.
- Talk to your healthcare team promptly if you have new or worsening rashes.

Hand and foot problems

Some treatments can cause redness, tenderness, cracking, or blistering on the palms and soles.

- Keep hands and feet moisturised.
- Wear comfortable footwear.
- Avoid activities that create friction or pressure on affected areas.

Nail changes

- Keep nails short and clean.
- Wear gloves for household tasks.
- Tell your healthcare team if nails become painful, swollen, or show signs of infection.

When to contact your healthcare team

Contact your treatment or transplant team promptly if you develop:

- A rapidly spreading rash
- Severe itching or pain
- Blisters or peeling skin
- Open sores or wounds
- Increasing skin tightness or restricted movement
- Signs of infection, such as redness, swelling, warmth, discharge, or fever
- Any skin change that affects your daily activities

Remember

Most treatment-related skin changes can be managed successfully. Reporting symptoms early often prevents them from becoming more severe.

If you have concerns about your skin, speak with your haematologist, specialist nurse, GP, or transplant team.

Blood Cancer NZ Support Services

For information and support, call Blood Cancer NZ on 0800 15 10 15, email supportservices@bloodcancer.org.nz or speak with your Support Services Coordinator.

