Skin plays a key part in our health. The skin is the largest organ of the body and it is the first line of defense. It helps protect organs and tissues inside the body from the outside world. Skin helps to protect against infection and to keep our bodies the correct temperature.

Cancer treatments such as chemotherapy, biotherapy and radiation may cause changes in the skin, mouth, and nails. If you are ill, in bed, or not very active, you may be at higher risk for developing some skin damage or breakdown.

Skin and nail changes that may occur during chemotherapy treatments:
- infections of the mucous membranes of the mouth
- hair loss, called alopecia, from the scalp, face, and body
- drying, cracking, darkening, or loss of fingernails or toenails
- infections of open skin areas such as cuts or scrapes
- increased sensitivity to the sun

Skin and nail changes that may occur during biotherapy treatments:
- acne-like rash on the face, neck, chest and upper back
- redness and swelling of the nail fold with painful sores, which can affect any finger or toe nail

Skin changes that may occur to an area being treated with radiation:
- redness or darkening
- dryness
- itching
- peeling of the top layer of skin, which may require treatment
- hair loss, called alopecia, at the treated area
- moist reaction often in skin fold areas

To protect your skin during cancer treatments:
- Drink plenty of liquids during your treatments, unless the doctor has told you to limit fluids.
- Eat a healthful diet. Your nurse or dietitian will help you choose foods that are healthful but that do not cause mouth pain or discomfort.
- Check your mouth daily for white patches, and report these or any mouth pain to your doctor or nurse right away.
- Use non-alcohol mouthwashes and toothpastes.
- Use gentle, non-deodorant soaps to bathe. Pat skin dry and use soft, gentle towels and cloths. Do not wash off ink marks for radiation therapy.
- Use an electric razor to avoid nicks and cuts, which could become infected.
• Wear loose fitting, cotton clothing, and undergarments that don’t bind or constrict.

• Use only prescribed ointments, lotions, and powders at the radiation treatment site and/or other effected areas. Do not use deodorant, aftershave, or perfumes near these areas.

• Use plenty of sunscreen. Remember to use sunscreen on your head and wear a hat or scarf when you are outside if you have hair loss in this area. Stay out of the sun as much as possible.

• Check skin folds that are close to the radiation site for redness or white patches, which may be a sign of infection. Tell your doctor or nurse if you find these.

Each person’s skin responds differently to cancer treatments. Some people have few problems while others have more problems.

Talk to your doctor or nurse about your cancer treatments and what skin changes to expect. They can help you to prevent problems and treat them without delay.