

Caring for your skin, hair and nails when on “Targeted Therapies”

“Targeted therapies” are another name for epidermal growth factor receptor inhibitors (EGFRIs). These types of drugs work in a number of cancers by blocking cell processes that cancer cells need to survive. They hit a very specific set of cells in your body which is why EGFRIs are called “Targeted Therapies”. Names of the most commonly used EGFRIs are:

Erlotinib (Tarceva®)
Cetuximab (Erbix®)
Panitumumab (Vectibix®)
Lapatinib (Tykerb®)

Unfortunately, like other cancer drugs, EGFRIs have side effects. The most common body part affected by these drugs is the skin. These include: an acne-like rash, dry skin, itching, nail changes and hair changes. Although side effects are often mild or moderate, on occasion, they can be severe. When side effects are severe and do not respond to treatment, your doctor may need to stop treatment either for a short time or permanently. Thus, it is important to know about preventing and treating the skin side effects.

What to look for:

Acne-Like Rash:

An acne-like rash often begins 1-2 weeks after starting the drug. It may continue for many weeks and then slowly improve. It may look like acne but it is not acne and it will not improve with anti-acne medicines. The rash occurs most often on the face, neck, chest and back and may cause you discomfort or itching. For most, the rash is mild to moderate and will not affect daily life. For some people, the rash is more severe and may make the person self-conscious about the way they look.

Dry Skin:

After a couple of months, you may notice that your skin looks dry and scaly. This may happen on your arms, legs or body. The dryness may be so severe that the skin on the fingertips and heels crack or fissure.

Itching:

Itching may start in the first few months of taking the drug. It may occur on the scalp, body, arms and legs. It also may itch where you have a rash or the skin is dry.

Nail Changes:

One of the later side effects of these drugs can be painful swelling and redness around the fingernails or toenails. Sometimes the nail area can become infected and require antibiotics.

Hair Changes:

After you are on the drug for some time (usually over four months), your hair may change. Sometimes you can lose patches of hair or have hair thinning. On the other hand, you may notice hair growing in areas such as the face. Eyelashes and eyebrows may grow very long. Long curl-

What you should do to prevent or manage side effects:

General:

- Prevention is key. Talk to your doctor or nurse when you start your treatments to determine what prevention options for skin problems are suitable for you.
- Tell your doctor or nurse as soon as you have any skin, hair or nail problems.
- Avoid being in the sun and use a sunscreen with an SPF of 30 or higher.

Rash:

Your doctor may order an antibiotic or special creams to put on the red, inflamed areas.

- Do not stop taking your drugs unless your doctor or nurse tells you to stop.
- Do not use over-the-counter acne drugs or creams on the rash.

Dry Skin:

- For dry skin, use over-the-counter moisturizers (Vanicream®, Eucerin®, Aquaphor®). In general, use ointments or creams sold in tubs/ avoid lotions.
- Apply creams or ointments within 15 minutes of showering or bathing. Avoid showering or bathing with hot water and for long periods of time. Use gentle soaps (Dove®, Cetaphil®, Aveeno®, Basis®).
- For very dry skin that is scaly and flakey, use over-the-counter ammonium lactate (Am-Lactin®) cream.
- For cracks in the fingertips, use creams or ointments containing zinc oxide (Desitin®). Wear cotton gloves or socks at night after applying creams.
- Cracks also may be treated with Super Glue® to prevent pain and allow healing.
- Your doctor may prescribe special creams to put on dry patches that hurt or itch.

Hair Changes:

- Use electric razors to remove any new or increased hair growth. Avoid using a straight razor, waxing or chemical depilatories.

Itching:

- Use over-the-counter creams that contain menthol. (Sarna Ultra cream®)
- Over-the-counter antihistamine pills also may reduce itching (Benadryl®, Claritin®, etc.)but may cause drowsiness.
- When itching is severe and generalized, relief can be obtained by taking oatmeal (Aveeno®) baths.
- Your doctor may prescribe other anti-inflammatory or anti-itch drugs or creams to be applied or taken by mouth. In general, anti-itch tablets cause drowsiness, so you may want to take them only at night.
- For itching on the scalp, try Selsun Blue®, Neutrogena T-Gel® shampoos or your doctor may order special foams or shampoos.

Nail Changes:

- For swelling and redness around finger or toenails, wear soft shoes and avoid extreme heat or cold or bumping them
- Your doctor may use a special chemical (silver nitrate) that is put on every week.
- If there is pain or redness, soak fingers or toes in a solution of white vinegar mixed in an equal amount of tap water for 15 minutes in the evening.
- Your doctor may prescribe antibiotics if there is an infection or recommend to apply a chemical (silver nitrate) to your nail folds.

Mouth changes:

- If you have mouth sores eat soft, non-spicy foods. Your doctor may order a pain drug especially if the pain affects eating.
- Biotene® products are gentler with your mouth and lips.
- Good oral care is important. Be sure to brush and floss your teeth and see an oral health care provider before treatment and during treatment.