

# skin | provisions for quality patient care

## guidelines for oncology skin treatments

**DURING CANCER TREATMENT** and the recovery period, which may last a year or longer, the body needs all of its resources to heal. It does not need to cope with unnecessary stressors such as stimulating spa services. In

person affected by cancer treatment, therefore, needs the restorative action of the parasympathetic response, which can slow heart rate, regulate blood vessel dilation, intestinal peristalsis and gland activity. Activating the parasymp-

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most cases, it is not the disease that saps or damages the body; it is the side effects of chemotherapy, radiation, medications and/or surgery. Natural skin function, blood counts, immune function, lymphatic drainage, digestion and organ vitality are all affected by these elements, and take time to return to normal regulation. Vigorous facial manipulation or stimulating products are not helpful during healing because they activate the sympathetic nervous system, causing excessive skin detoxification, changes to skin temperature and constriction of capillaries, which can all lead to minor side effects such as skin irritation and impaired healing. Activating the sympathetic nervous system has a profound effect on other systems in the body. It can accelerate the heart rate, constrict blood vessels and depress the gastrointestinal system. The

pathetic system also aids in regulating excess skin functions, thus lowering the side effects associated with oncology medical treatments. Undemanding manipulations, such as pressure point or lymphatic manipulation, initiate these restorative, parasympathetic reactions.

When discussing stimulants, it is important to clarify exactly what the term means. In a fundamental way, as defined by classical systems such as Chinese and Ayurvedic medicine, as well as Western traditions, treatments have two primary purposes: stimulating (warming) or relaxing (cooling).

In general, most people—but especially cancer patients—suffer from systemic inflammation, and therefore need nutrition and relaxants far more than they need stimulants. Excessive stimulants are incredibly toxic, and elicit subtle changes in the chemical composition necessary

for cellular responses that lead to repair. People with cancer have increased levels of oxidative stress and a reduced ability to eliminate metabolic waste. By utilizing high levels of skin nutrition, sedative skin manipulations and a reduction in the duration of time to perform a treatment, the skin will experience an improvement in the quality and rate of repair, drainage of edema and reduction of inflammation.

### Level of treatment demands

Due to a lack of clinical training, many estheticians are working with cancer clients, utilizing protocols designed for standard skin care applications. As these examples show, the outcome for successful skin support is determined by the esthetician's understanding of the oncology patient's physical and mental state.

Estheticians need to begin by being aware of the level of demand the treatment has (both physically and psychologically) on the patient. Let's start by looking at physical variation due to medical oncology treatments.

The organs of detoxification, including the lymphatic system, become overextended as the body metabolizes not only the drugs but also the debris from dying cancer cells and other cells affected by the treatments. This cellular debris overloads lymph nodes that are part of the body's filtration system.

Additionally, patients are more sedentary during treatment. Muscular action is one of the prime movers of the lymphatic system, and the lack of this action causes lymph to stagnate. A demanding facial therapy treatment can stir up this sediment, overwhelming the lymphatic system's filtration capability.

Some people will experience cognitive problems during their course of chemotherapy. This condition is brought about by the introduction of a non-organic systemic supply of chemicals to the body. Studies have established that the brain is predisposed to the absorption and storage of chemicals and toxins. Those who have experienced it commonly refer to the condition as "chemo brain." Once continues

## Combined chemoradiation skin care algorithm chart



again, a demanding facial therapy treatment can stir up these toxins, overwhelming the lymphatic system's filtration capability. The most common display of this condition is described as having difficulty concentrating and remembering words, having trouble finding the right words and undertaking new learning, as well as having difficulty managing daily activities. This condition can be debilitating and frustrating.

The emotional aspect of cancer begins with diagnosis, and follows the patient throughout treatment. Even the language used to describe cancer has a negative connotation. Cancer patients lose control of many aspects of their lives. They are often told how brave they are, which is how they are perceived because they are holding onto their emotions. Stimulating treatments can set off a cascade of emotional release, which patients and practitioners need to be prepared for.

Therefore, it makes sense to spare the body from stirring the pent up emotions and waste products, which then could leave the patient feeling ill or fatigued for days following a facial. A focus on being supportive and nurturing creates many beneficial outcomes, such as an increase in physical energy, a feeling of wholeness and a lessening of pain and anxiety.

### Skin algorithm charts

Skin algorithm charts are used in esthetics to determine skin types and conditions. However, in medical oncology, a skin algorithm has a different representation of the skin. Medical skin algorithm defines changes to the skin's integrity, such as erythema or dry desquamation. This is termed a clinical presentation. It is important to understand the medical language used when describing skin changes that occur due to medical procedures and drugs. It will enhance your communication with the oncology medical team and establishes your professionalism as a practitioner. Understanding the clinical presentation also allows you to address skin conditions that are within the scope of your licensure.

### Time allotment

The duration of facials/skin therapies, especially the initial treatments, need to be reduced to 20 to 30 minutes. It is important to become familiar with the skin's response to touch, pressure and products. The goal of the initial visit should be to gain

a greater understanding of where the patient is in his or her healing process, and what effect the medical treatments have had on their skin. A patient may be scheduled for one hour; however the time should be partially allocated for hands-on treatment, and evaluation and self care instruction the rest of the time. Scheduling must be flexible, allowing for plenty of time to meet the specific needs of the patient. Confirmation of appointments is a must, due to impaired cognitive abilities. It will be necessary to have ample patience, which also means time. Thus, practitioners cannot be rushed during the time scheduled for a cancer patient's treatment.

The provision for quality patient care can enhance the cancer patient's life and overall comfort during every step of the healing journey, through diagnosis, surgery, chemotherapy and radiation. Spa services for cancer patients can provide a multitude of health benefits. Understanding the adjustments needed to accommodate this medically challenged population is paramount. As you have learned, there are many facets of oncology skin care. Staying current and relevant in your practice, and if necessary acquiring specialized training, will allow you to practice responsibly and with confidence. Knowledge and practical experience will make the difference in how you can help improve the quality of life for cancer patients. ■

*photos courtesy of Mountain Radiation Oncology, Asheville, NC*

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