

## The Canadian Pemphigus and Pemphigoid Foundation

### Taking Care of You - Advice on Personal Skin Care

Lesions are painful and understandably take up most of your attention: we all just want them to heal! But what about the parts of our skin not yet affected? How do we keep these areas healthy and strong?

In this information bulletin, we explore some approaches to hygiene and how best to modify them to help our skin stay healthy. We focus on skin care for unaffected areas but also touch on wound care (since the two are so inextricably linked).

### Keeping Clean - Bathing and Showering

It's no secret that showers and baths can be painful experiences for pemphigus and pemphigoid patients. You may want to try taking painkillers (acetaminophen, ibuprofen or a prescribed pain medication) 30-60 minutes before your bath or shower to minimize discomfort and pain. There is no right answer: deciding whether to shower or bathe will vary by individual.

Showering can feel like a high-speed assault and could damage skin rather than help it heal.

But if you're limited to a shower, try redirecting the water towards the wall to still create a moist environment then use a wet soft facecloth to gently pat the skin.

In addition to being more comfortable, baths can also help lesions heal.

A warm bath can allow dressings that stick to your skin to fall off. By bathing before each dressing change, you can remove crusts and keep wounds moist to promote healing.

With Canada's clean water supply, the risk of getting an infection from water is very low. In fact, bathing may help reduce the concentration of bacteria on the skin.

When you have lesions, try soap substitutes that are non-alkaline, non-comedogenic and fragrance-free (e.g. Cetaphil, SpectroGel, Dove bar (for Sensitive Skin)). When you have a lot of crust, antibacterial soaps may reduce the risk of infection. Alkaline or heavily fragranced soap products at any stage can irritate the skin.

Have a warm (not hot) bath for no more than 15 minutes. If you stay any longer, your skin can dry out. Dry skin does not necessarily promote healing (see below).

How often you bathe depends partly on age. In those younger than 50 years, oil glands are usually quite active and these patients need to bathe every other day. Older patients may only need to bathe every 3-5 days.

### After-Bath Care

Gently pat your skin dry with a towel. If you are using a moisturizer or other emollient for dry skin, it's best to apply it just after leaving the bath or shower to get the most out of it.

Most medical professionals believe you should apply moisturizers (if you need them) before any topical steroids. How long you wait before applying medication will depend on the dryness of the skin. As a general rule, moisturizers should be fully absorbed before applying any medication. Your skin should feel tacky but not slippery.

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## The Importance of Moisture Balance

It is now understood that a moist wound environment hastens the healing of both acute and chronic wounds and helps new tissue grow. Topical antibiotics or steroids delivered in moist bases (e.g. ointments, colloids, etc.) may help to hasten wound healing. Your dermatologist may have specific recommendations regarding moisture balance.

## Keeping up a Good Face

Some of us develop lesions on our face, which can be challenging on several levels. First, it can be hard to keep this area clean and healthy. More than that, our facial appearance can seriously impact our sense of well-being. Since facial lesions are difficult if not impossible to hide, they can make us struggle with

how we see ourselves and how we believe others see us.

Healthy skin care – especially facial skin care – requires that we regularly cleanse, moisturize (if you have dry skin), medicate and protect our skin. To minimize irritation, use a water-based, non-comedogenic, fragrance-free moisturizer. Apply medication once the moisturizer has been absorbed into the skin.

Camouflage make-up can help minimize the appearance of lesions. It does not inevitably delay healing, but still, use make-up only when necessary. Water-based, non-comedogenic, fragrance-free products are the safest such as Sweet Leilani ([www.sweetleilani.com](http://www.sweetleilani.com)), Cover FX ([www.coverfx.com](http://www.coverfx.com)) and others. Ask your dermatologist to recommend the product best for you and demonstrate how best to apply it.

## Staying Active and Getting Outside

Staying active is critical to our general health. We need to get outside, move our bodies and get some natural Vitamin D into our systems. Being sun-smart, however, is important for two reasons: healing lesions are much more sun-sensitive than healthy skin; and exposing skin with active lesions to the sun may result in post-inflammatory hyper-pigmentation. In other words, the affected area of the skin can get darker.

Protect yourself from the sun. Sunscreens with physical blocking agents (zinc oxide and titanium dioxide) have the least risk of causing irritation. Chemical sunscreens can cause an allergic reaction and possible inflammatory immune response of the skin. Fragranced sunscreens can also irritate the skin. If applying sunscreen is too painful, consider wearing loose clothing and large wide-brimmed hats that cover both your face and neck.

Be vigilant. Ask your pharmacist if your medications may make you more sensitive to the sun. If so, plan accordingly before heading outdoors.



## Hair, Shaving and Personal Grooming

**Hair:** Pemphigus commonly affects the scalp. The crust often builds up around the hairs. In fact, crusts will stick to the hair and grow out very slowly, creating an environment for infection.

Regular shampooing can help remove the crust and promote healing. Shampoos that can help remove dead skin and crust have a low concentration of salicylic acid (i.e., a B-hydroxyacid).

Cutting the hair does not promote healing, but may make it easier to manage and remove stubborn crusts.

In theory, laser hair removal and electrolysis are safe for pemphigus and pemphigoid patients. In practice, however, the safety of these techniques depends on the technician's skill level. Before proceeding, the technician should test any hair removal technique on a small area to check for signs of inflammation or irritation. Try taking an antihistamine or analgesic before treatment to reduce irritation. Avoid laser and electrolysis when the disease is active.

Occasionally, the disease itself, along with certain oral medications such as immunosuppressants can lead to hair loss. Don't panic! If there's been no deep infection, this hair does grow back when the lesions have healed and you've stopped the medication.

**Shaving:** Men who have significant lesions over the beard area may want to use clippers rather than straight or electric razors to avoid repeatedly traumatizing the area.

**Nail Care:** If you have lesions in the nail bed or nail fold areas, avoid manicures and pedicures until the lesions are no longer active. You may find it helpful to keep nails short. Carefully file down broken or flaking nails so as not to disturb this area of the skin.

## The Challenge

Pemphigus or pemphigoid create a whole new set of challenges to caring for our skin. While you treat lesions, stay vigilant about caring for the whole body. It may take extra time and effort but it will ultimately result in healthier, stronger skin.

*The Canadian Pemphigus and Pemphigoid Foundation produces the Information Bulletin as part of its Managing Our Health Program. Expert advice in preparing this information bulletin was provided by Dr. Scott Walsh, MD, PhD, FRCPC, DABD, Program Director of Dermatology, University of Toronto, Ontario and member of the Canadian Pemphigus and Pemphigoid Foundation's Medical Advisory Council.*

**Managing Our Health Program** provides information to patients on ways in which they can enhance their general health and better cope with the symptoms of their illness and/or the side effects of their treatment therapies. For more information, visit [www.pemphigus.ca](http://www.pemphigus.ca).

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