Imiquimod Treatment
For Skin Cancer

You have been asked to use this medication once/day Monday-Friday for 6 weeks.

Both Aldara® and Zyclara® are topical creams which contain the active ingredient “Imiquimod” and are used to treat skin cancers. They work very well, but patients must understand how they work. They are sometimes referred to as “topical chemotherapy” – that is, they chemically destroy the abnormal cells that are present in the area where they are applied.

The reason it’s important to know how they work is so that you understand that redness and inflammation are expected and normal when using these products. It’s also important to know that the skin, especially sun-exposed skin, is “peppered” with slightly abnormal cells. The significance of this is that you can expect treatment with either cream to create some redness almost anywhere it’s applied. Skin cancers are dense collections of abnormal skin cells, so the redness and inflammation will be most intense in these locations.

Because of how they work, users of Imiquimod must keep a few things in mind:

First, as previously stated, expect that the skin will get red and inflamed. In order to limit how inflamed the area gets, do not apply excessive amounts. Only a thin layer of cream needs to be applied directly to the affected site.

Secondly, do not put a bandage over the treatment site while the medication is on your skin (covering with loose clothing is OK, though). Doing so makes the medication work too strongly and you can expect far more redness than you otherwise would have. That being said, it’s OK to bandage the site....just not while the medication is on your skin. For example, if you have an event to attend where the area must be covered with a bandage, it’s OK to do so as long as you don’t have the medicine on at the time. Also, it’s OK to skip a treatment here or there if the irritation becomes too intense or even if you simply forget. As long as you treat the site on most of the days for the duration that it was prescribed, then it should work.

Third, when and how you put it on is important. We ask that you don’t get too much direct sunlight exposure on the treatment site. A bandage would block out the sunlight, but as stated previously, we ask that you don’t bandage the site while the medication is on your skin. Therefore, we usually ask that you apply it in the evening. Doing so will allow you to apply sunblock, a light coat of make-up, or even a bandage during the day if needed. If applying at night, though, we do request that you apply it at least 30 minutes before sleeping so that it doesn’t simply wipe off on the bed linens when you lay down.

Finally, one frustrating feature of this medication is that it’s only prescribed in packets rather than tubes. In general, you can squeeze far more than one treatment out of each packet. So, don’t tear them open as the directions suggest. Instead, put a pinhole in the packet or take scissors and snip off just the corner. Doing so will allow you to squeeze out just the desired amount and the rest can be used the following day.

![Redness Timeline of 6-Week Treatment](image-url)