



Patient information

**Radiation therapy  
to the breast**



This brochure is designed to inform you and your family/carers about radiation therapy. It aims to give you some idea of what to expect during and after your treatment, and we hope to relieve any concerns you may have.

It does not replace discussion with the health professionals involved in your care, and we encourage you to raise questions and concerns.

Our experienced staff members are available to assist you. Please do not hesitate to ask for advice.

## Radiation therapy is the use of radiation to destroy cancer cells

It works because cancer cells are more sensitive to radiation than normal cells. When a small dose of radiation is given each day over several weeks, normal cells can recover from radiation but cancer cells cannot.

Radiation therapy is given to the breast or chest wall to reduce the chance of cancer returning to that area after surgery and/or chemotherapy.



### What are the possible side effects?

#### Skin reaction

After two or three weeks of treatment your skin may become red, itchy and irritated. This reaction normally lasts through the rest of your treatment and usually settles two to four weeks after treatment has finished.

Towards the end of treatment the reaction can become more intense and this may increase for one to two weeks after treatment. You may experience some superficial skin loss, in particular in the axilla [armpit], under the breast, the nipple or the neck area. This may require a simple dressing until the area heals, up to three weeks after treatment is complete. Please advise the nursing staff who will provide instructions and support.

#### Fatigue

You may become increasingly tired as you progress toward the end of your treatment. This is a normal reaction to the radiotherapy and each person is affected to varying degrees. Finding a balance between rest and activity will help you cope with this side-effect.

#### Aches and pains in the breast area

You may feel minor twinges or pain in the breast area, this discomfort is not uncommon and will subside once treatment is completed. Please feel free to discuss with your treatment team.

### How can I manage my skin during treatment?

#### Moisturise twice a day

You will be recommended a skin moisturiser to use during treatment. At the start of treatment, apply cream to the area being treated TWICE A DAY. As treatment progresses you may need to apply the cream three to four times per day. If changes to your skin occur in the treatment area, inform the nursing staff as you may need to use a different cream.

#### Wear loose fitting clothing

Avoid wearing tight fitting clothing that could potentially rub or irritate the skin. You may find singlets, cotton 'crop-tops' or old loose fitting bras more comfortable.

#### Avoid excessive temperatures

Avoid exposure of the treatment area to excessive temperatures, such as: direct sunlight, heat packs, ice packs, electric blankets, saunas or hot spas.

#### Wash with warm water and pat dry

You may wash the skin that is being treated with warm water and a mild non-perfumed soap. Pat the skin dry – do not rub.

*Do not shave or use deodorants under the arm on the side being treated.*



## After treatment

When all side effects from the radiation therapy have settled [usually within two to four weeks after treatment is finished], you can resume your normal skin care routine. You may use the lotions, creams, soaps and deodorants that you used before your therapy started.

### Skin discomfort and sensitivity

The skin in the treated area will begin to settle within four weeks after treatment. If you experience discomfort in the area you may need to take some pain medication during this period.

### Increased firmness

Mild to moderate firmness can occur in the treated breast, which can persist for six to eight weeks post treatment but requires no intervention.

### Swelling of the treated breast

Moderate swelling can persist six to eight weeks after treatment and can be quite uncomfortable. Mild swelling may persist for up to one year or more and doesn't pose too much of a problem.

The nursing staff can advise on management techniques to reduce the swelling and therefore the discomfort. Referral to a lymphoedema specialist can be made if required.

## Common questions

- **How will radiation therapy affect my daily living?**  
You may continue your usual work and activities but you may experience some tiredness near the end of your course of treatment and in the weeks following. Unless otherwise advised you may eat and drink normally, alcohol consumption in moderation is permitted and you can continue to take any prescribed medications.
- **Can I wash the marks off my skin?**  
We ask that you don't deliberately wash them off as this may further irritate your skin. The radiation therapists will re-apply them each day as required.
- **What happens after my treatment is finished?**  
Your follow up arrangements will be discussed and organised by your treating team prior to completing treatment.





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