

RADIOTHERAPY TO THE BREAST

A GUIDE FOR PATIENTS/FAMILIES



This brochure provides information about Radiotherapy to the Breast. It is designed to respond to the questions most frequently asked by patients.




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Your doctor has recommended radiation treatment for your breast cancer. The radiation treatments are given while you are lying on your back on a 'breast board'. Your arms will be raised up and resting on a holder attached to the breast board. It is important that you be in the same position each time your radiation treatments are given. The machine moves around you to deliver the treatment.

General side effects

Below are some of the side effects that may happen during the course of treatment as time progresses. Some side effects start gradually, often towards the end of 2 weeks of treatment. Some side effects continue for weeks or months after treatment. Most will be gone about 1 month after treatment is finished. How you feel also depends on other factors, for example whether you have had previous chemotherapy treatments.

1. Skin

For the first week you will probably not notice any changes, and then your skin may become pink or red like a burn.

Sometimes the skin may even peel or blister towards the end of your treatment. This is most likely to happen where there are two folds of skin that come together, such as under the breast and underarm or in the crease of your neck, if you are being treated in that area.

Effects of radiation may persist or progress even after completion of treatment. therefore you may notice breakdown of skin after completion of treatment.

Actions that will help

Do	Don't
Be careful when washing the affected area. Use lukewarm water and mild soap such as baby soap.	Scrub the affected area hard, which would result in damaging the skin.
Pat dry with a soft towel.	Use cosmetics, perfumes, cologne or deodorant in the area of treatment.
Apply aloe vera gel throughout the treatment, unless the skin has broken down. If using an aloe vera plant, the leaf should be split and the gel inside applied on the skin. If using aloe vera gel that is readymade, it must be 99% pure.	Put anything very hot or very cold on the treatment area (for example heating pad or ice pack).
Wear loose clothes. Try to wear pure cotton clothes.	Swim in chlorinated pools.
Protect your skin from the sun or cold wind.	Smoke
Report any redness, rash, itching or skin break down to your nurse or doctor.	

2. Discomfort

You may experience some numbness, tingling or jabbing pains in your breast during your radiation. The breast, including the nipple, may feel tender and sore to touch. This is a normal part of healing and eventually improves.

3. Tiredness

You may feel tired throughout your treatment, but most people recover their energy 1 to 2 months after radiation is completed. During radiation therapy, the body uses a lot of energy for healing. You may also be tired because of stress related to your illness, daily trips for treatment, lack of sleep, poor appetite, and the effects of radiation on normal cells.

Actions that will help

Do	Don't
Continue with your regular activities for as long as possible.	Overwork yourself. If you start to feel tired, limit your activities and use your free time in a restful way, and only do the work that is most important.
Light exercises. Sometimes, light exercise such as walking may reduce tiredness.	
If you need to take time off from work, speak with your employer to adjust your schedule.	
If required, you can speak with your nurse or doctor on how to deal with the tiredness.	
To help conserve your energy, ask for help from neighbours and relatives for shopping, housework, childcare, and daily work.	

4. Arm swelling

After surgery and/or radiation treatment some women may develop swelling in the arm. This is because the drainage system is slower in that arm after removal of the lymph glands. This side effect can occur after surgery alone or in patients who will receive radiotherapy to the armpit area after surgery.

Actions that will help

Do	Don't
Have all injections, blood tests and blood pressure done on the other arm if possible.	Favour or "baby" the arm. Use it normally.
Use an electric razor for shaving under the arm.	
Wash and clean cuts, and watch for signs of infection (redness, swelling and warmth).	
Keep your arm raised whenever possible.	
Sleep with your arm up on a pillow.	
Arm exercises to help your arm get back to normal. Ask your doctor or nurse for more information.	



If you have any questions, please contact your nurse at:

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