

# What to do When Receiving Radiation Therapy to the Breast Area



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This pamphlet will give you information about what to expect while receiving radiation therapy to the breast area.

Many patients receive radiation therapy without major side effects. You can help to prevent or reduce these side effects by using the following information. Your Radiation Oncologist, RN case manager and Radiation Therapist will provide you and your family with care, support and information throughout your course of treatment. Please ask your Radiation Therapist any questions when you come for treatment each day or when you see your doctor (radiation oncologist) or RN case manager at your weekly review session.

## **Planning the Radiation Therapy treatments (Level 1B – 1 below the main floor)**

Please check in at the reception desk on level 1B, where your photograph will be taken to assist us in identifying you during the course of your treatment.

The Radiation Oncologist and Radiation Therapist will use a CT simulator to determine the area of treatment. A CT simulator is an x-ray scanner with sophisticated computer software that provides the team with detailed images of the body. When the area for treatment is determined, marks are placed on the skin. As these marks can wear off, it will be necessary to give you small permanent tattoo marks using a fine, sterile needle. The Radiation Therapists will explain this procedure to you.

You can expect to be here for at least 1 hour for your planning appointment. The doctors, physicists and radiation therapists will continue to work with the information obtained during the planning process to develop a customized plan that is specific to you.

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You will be called at home with the date and time of your first treatment appointment.

## **Your Radiation Therapy treatments (Level 2B – 2 below the main floor)**

The first day on the treatment unit will take between 30 minutes and 45 minutes because the radiation therapists and other members of the team will be checking all aspects of the treatment plan prior to starting your treatment. As part of your first treatment, the radiation therapists will take x-rays or electronic images. These will be used to ensure that your treatment matches exactly what was planned. This procedure may be repeated during your course of treatment.

For the remainder of your treatments, you can expect to be in the room for approximately 15 to 20 minutes. The actual radiation treatment will only take a few minutes to deliver, while the rest of the time is taken up to ensure that you are in the correct position for your treatment.

## **What are some common side effects of radiation therapy?**

Radiation side effects vary from person to person. These side effects depend on:

- The part of the body being treated
- The type of radiation used
- The amount of radiation given
- A person's general health

## **Fatigue**

Some patients may feel more tired especially after 3 – 4 weeks of treatment.

## **What to do?**

- Stay active - research shows that people who keep active during treatment are less tired
- Pace yourself, especially with activities that can be overtiring
- Ask family members and friends to help with some commitments and activities
- Eat meal at regular times - be sure to include breakfast
- Keep foods on hand that are easy to prepare - canned salmon, peanut butter, yogurt, etc.
- Drink lots of fluids
- Take naps if needed

## **Appetite**

Some patients may lose interest in food while receiving treatment. Chemotherapy and pain medications can also cause loss of appetite.

### **What to do?**

- Eat small meals often, instead of 3 large meals a day
- Eat foods that you enjoy
- Make the food interesting and appealing
- Drink plenty of fluids between meals
- Light exercise and fresh air may help your appetite
- Ask for an appointment with the dietitian

## **What may happen to my skin?**

Patients receiving radiation treatment commonly experience changes to the skin in the area where the treatment is given. This is a normal and temporary side effect of treatment. The most common change in the area during the first three weeks of treatment is a reddening of the skin.

### **What will it feel like?**

- Your skin may feel warm, dry, and itchy
- Your skin may look slightly red or tanned
- Your breast may feel tender and sore to touch

### **What to do?**

- Wash with warm water and gently pat dry
- Use a mild soap such as Dove or Ivory
- Avoid rubbing or scratching the area
- Wear loose fitting clothing. Cotton or soft fabrics are recommended, such as a cotton sports bra; no under wire bras.
- You may use an electric shaver to shave your underarm
- If the underarm is in the treatment area, use deodorant only if the skin has not broken down.
- Aloe Vera gel can be applied to the treated areas 3 to 4 times per day. This may help to reduce itching
- Use a water-based moisturizing cream such as Lubriderm
- Do not expose the area to direct sunlight. If unavoidable, wear SPF 30 or above.



## **You may experience other skin changes, such as**

- Itchy, dry, scaly
- Flaking and/or peeling of the skin

## **What to do?**

- Stop using Aloe Vera gel, when your skin becomes very dry
- Continue to use the moisturizing cream on the dry areas
- At your weekly appointment with the doctor, ask about any medication that can be prescribed to help
- Sometimes patients may experience a reaction with a breakdown of the skin and a wet discharge in the treatment area. 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. This may happen in the fourth to fifth week of treatment or one to two weeks after your radiation treatment is complete.

## **What will it feel like?**

- Skin becomes red/flaky
- More itching
- Pain
- Swelling
- Open skin areas especially under the breast and underarm
- Small blisters
- Wet discharge

## **What to do?**

- Stop using Aloe Vera gel
- You may need to protect the open area by using a dressing
- Wash your hands well before and after touching the area
- Saline soaks can be helpful. Speak to your Radiation Therapist or RN case manager for information.
- At your weekly review appointment, your doctor may prescribe further skin care products or medications if necessary.
- If you need dressings, your Radiation Therapists can direct you to the Radiation Nursing Clinic, where nurses will assist you in applying dressings and give you advice about the skin care products prescribed by your doctor



## How long will these skin reactions last?

The skin area will start to heal 2-3 weeks after treatment is finished. You may call your RN case manager if you have any questions or if your skin gets worse.

## What will happen when I finish my radiation treatments?

At your last weekly review appointment, your doctor or RN case manager will give you a follow-up appointment to see the doctor several weeks or months after your last radiation treatment appointment. After your last radiation treatment appointment, continue caring for your skin in the same way as when you were receiving radiation, until you notice your skin getting back to normal.

The area of the skin that was treated will now be more sensitive to the sun. We recommend that you cover this area when out in the sun and use a sunscreen with SPF of 30 or higher at all times. Do not hesitate to call the hospital once you are finished with your treatment, if you have any questions or concerns.

Your RN case manager or radiation therapists will also give you a booklet “**Life After Treatment**”, which contains information to assist you and those who care about you in your journey as a breast cancer survivor. There are also many other useful materials available from the Patient and Family Library on the main floor.

## Important contact numbers:

Radiation Oncologist: Dr \_\_\_\_\_ Ext \_\_\_\_\_

RN Case Manager: \_\_\_\_\_ Ext \_\_\_\_\_

Treatment unit: # \_\_\_\_\_ Ext \_\_\_\_\_

Please visit the Patient and Family Library on the main floor for additional information and resources related to your treatment.