

What to Expect When Getting Radiation Therapy for Breast Cancer

For patients having radiation therapy at Princess Margaret Cancer Centre

Read this pamphlet to know about:

- The main steps in planning radiation treatment
- How to manage common side effects
- What happens when you finish treatment
- Where to get more information

For more information on Radiation Therapy, please watch our patient education videos at www.whattoexpectrt.theprincessmargaret.ca. These videos offer a step-by-step guide to the radiation therapy treatment process. They explain how radiation works in the body. They also explain how your team works together to deliver the highest quality treatments.



Your radiation oncologist (cancer doctor), nurse, radiation therapists and other health care team members will provide you and your family with care, support and information during your treatment.

If you have any questions, talk to your radiation therapists when you come for your treatment each day. You can also talk to your radiation oncologist or nurse at your weekly review appointment.



Interpretation is available if you speak very little or no English. Please let us know as soon as possible that you need help with interpretation.

Your radiation therapy planning

To plan your radiation therapy, you will need to have a planning CT scan. A CT scan gives us the detailed x-ray images we need to plan your treatment.

You will start your radiation therapy once your treatment plan has been done. On the day of your planning CT scan, go to level 1B (one floor below the main floor) of the Princess Margaret Cancer Centre. Check in at the reception desk.

You will have your picture taken. Your picture will be saved with your file to help us know who you are when you come for treatment. When you are done, have a seat in the waiting room. Your radiation therapist will come and get you from the waiting room.

What can I expect at my planning CT scan appointment?

At your planning CT scan:

- Your radiation therapists will explain what will happen during the appointment.
- You will have a CT scan to take pictures of the treatment area.
- Your radiation therapists will measure the treatment area. They will draw on your skin with markers to mark the area.
- Because these marks can wash off, your radiation therapists will make tiny permanent (lasting) marks on your skin called tattoos.

These tattoos are used to make sure your body is always in the right position for treatment. The tattoos look like tiny freckles. Your radiation therapists will explain this procedure to you first.

In some cases, your radiation oncologist may ask you to use a device that controls your breathing such as the Active Breathing Coordinator™ (ABC). If you need to use the ABC device, you will learn how to use it before your planning CT scan.

For more information, read the pamphlet called “Know about the Active Breathing Coordinator™ (ABC) Device”.

The doctors, physicists and therapists will use the information from your CT scan to plan your treatment.

You can expect to be here for about 1 hour for this appointment.

Your radiation therapy treatment

When will I get my first radiation therapy appointment?

You will get your first radiation therapy appointment at the time of the planning CT scan. Or you will get a phone call a few days after your planning CT scan with the date, time and place of your first radiation therapy appointment.

Where do I go for my radiation therapy?

You will get your radiation therapy on level 2B (2 levels below the main floor) of the Princess Margaret Cancer Centre.

Check in at the reception desk on level 2B when you arrive. The staff there will show you how to check in.

Can I choose when I have my radiation therapy appointments?

A large number of patients are treated every day. Because of this, we may not be able to give you the times that you ask for. However, your radiation therapists will try to help you if you have special reasons for needing an exact time.

What to expect at your radiation therapy appointment

Your radiation therapists will use the measurements from your treatment plan and the permanent marks (tattoos) to place you into your treatment position. They will take x-ray image(s) to check that you are in the right position every day. Once your position has been checked and any changes have been made, you will have your treatment.

How long is the appointment?

You should plan to be at the hospital for 30 to 60 minutes each day. Your treatments will take about 15 to 20 minutes. Most of this time is used to make sure you are in the right position for treatment.

If you need to use the Active Breathing Coordinator™ (ABC) device for your treatment, then your treatment may be 5 – 10 minutes longer.

Will I see the oncologist (cancer doctor) during my radiation therapy appointment?

You will meet with your radiation oncologist and nurse once a week during your radiation therapy. They will answer your questions and talk to you about any concerns that you may have. Tell them about any side effects you may have.

During your treatment, you can talk about your symptoms and concerns with your radiation therapists. They may send you to the Radiation Nursing Clinic (RNC) to be checked by our Radiation Nursing Team.

Managing common side effects from radiation therapy

Some of the common side effects are listed below. However, it is possible that you may have other side effects. Tell your radiation oncologist, radiation therapists, oncology (cancer) nurse what side effects you may have.

Skin changes

You may have changes to your skin in the treatment area. This is a normal side effect of treatment and will get better.

- After 1 – 2 weeks of treatment, your skin may feel irritated: warm, red, swollen, dry and tight, itchy.
- Some areas of your skin may become dry, flaky patches in later weeks.
- Near the end of your treatment, you may have some moist, open areas of your skin. This is most likely to happen where two folds of skin come together like under the breast, in the underarm, in the crease of the neck if these areas are being treated.
- The skin in the area being treated will begin to heal about 2 – 3 weeks after finishing your radiation treatments.

To learn how to care for your skin please see the pamphlet “Taking Care of Your Skin During Radiation Therapy.”

Will I feel fatigue while getting radiation therapy?

Fatigue (feeling tired) varies with each person and may begin early in treatment. It can slowly increase during treatment, and usually gets better 1 – 2 months after treatment is finished.

Do these things if you are feeling tired:

- Pace yourself. Break jobs down into smaller parts.
- Plan time to rest before and after activities.
- Ask for help with activities you do every day that make you tired or you find hard to do.
- Get some daily exercise (for example walking) but only do light physical activity.
- Keep a regular sleep routine at night.
- Rest during the day as needed.
- Eat a balanced diet and drink plenty of fluids.
- Have healthy, easy to prepare food on hand.
- Eat meals at regular times through the day and snacks if you need them.

Will there be changes in my appetite?

Some patients may not feel very hungry while getting treatment. Chemotherapy and pain medicines may also lead to a loss of appetite.

Do these things if your appetite changes:

- Eat small meals and snacks during the day, instead of 3 large meals a day.
- Eat foods that you enjoy.
- Have foods that are easy to prepare on hand.
- Bring a snack with you when you come for treatment, in case you feel hungry.
- Drink fluids between meals.
- Try to do light exercise and get fresh air, these may help your appetite.

Please speak with your radiation therapists, nurse or radiation oncologist (cancer doctor) if you would like an appointment with a dietitian.

What do I do if I have trouble managing my side effects from treatment?

If you need help managing a side effect, there are many members of your health care team ready to help you. You can discuss side effects with the radiation therapists at your treatment appointments. Or you can talk to your radiation oncologist or nurses during your weekly review appointment.

You can also visit the Radiation Nursing Clinic (RNC) at any time. The clinic is on level 2B, behind the main reception. The clinic is open Monday to Friday from 8:00 am – 5:30 pm. You will need to check in with the 2B main reception. You do not need an appointment to be seen at the clinic.

What can I expect when I finish radiation therapy?

Near the end of your treatment, we will give you a booklet called “Questions to ask before you finish your radiation treatment.”

At your final weekly review appointment you will be given a follow-up appointment to see the doctor a few weeks or months after your treatment is finished.

After treatment finishes, you may still have some side effects. These side effects will carry on and may get worse before they start to get better. This is normal. Continue to follow the instructions from your health care team until you feel better.

Call the hospital once you are finished with your treatment, if you have any questions or concern.

Where do I get more information?

Princess Margaret Cancer Centre:

Patient & Family Library on the main floor.

Phone: 416 946 4501 extension 5383

Email: patienteducation@uhn.ca

Website: www.uhn.ca/princessmargaret

For information about treatment and services at the Cancer Centre.

Other resources:

Wellspring:

Phone: 416 961 1928 or toll-free 1 877 499 9904

Website: www.wellspring.ca

The Canadian Cancer Society:

Phone: 416 488 5400 or call toll-free 1 800 268 8874

Website: www.cancer.ca

Home and Community Care (LHIN):

Phone: toll-free 310 2222. You do not need to dial an area code.

Website: healthcareathome.ca/torontocentral/en



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