



Information for  
patients having  
radiotherapy treatment  
to the breast or chest wall



CANCER PARTNERS UK



This leaflet explains how to prepare for your radiotherapy treatment. It also gives information on possible side effects and how they can be minimised.

## Side effects

There are a number of possible side effects to your radiotherapy treatment. You will not necessarily experience all of them, everyone is different.

Most side effects to radiotherapy are short-term. They may continue for some weeks after treatment has ended, but should gradually disappear over time. They are also not systemic, which means they only occur in the area we are treating.

Your radiographers are here to help you, so please let them know if you have any concerns. They will monitor your side effects during treatment and you will be able to contact them if you need to after your treatment is complete.

## Your skin

During your course of radiotherapy, you may develop a skin reaction in the area being treated. Symptoms are similar to those of mild sunburn, with skin becoming a little red, and sometimes sore, dry and itchy and can sometimes go on to break, this is a normal reaction and will get better. We can't tell who will develop a reaction, or how sore it might be, as everyone is different. However, a localised skin reaction is quite common so it's important to follow our advice on how to care for your skin during treatment. Dressing will be provided if required.

Please tell your radiographers straight away about any problems. They will monitor your skin very closely during treatment and can provide advice on the use of creams and ointments to help with any reactions you experience. Please tell them if you have an existing skin condition, as they may need to give you special advice.

## How to take care of your skin

As the skin in the area receiving radiotherapy will be sensitive during and after your treatment, please be gentle with the area and treat it with care and attention.

We recommend that you start following the instructions from the first day of treatment and up to six weeks afterwards, as it may take this long for any skin reactions to settle down. This is also because the effects of radiotherapy continue and then reach a peak about two weeks after treatment has finished. Remember these instructions are only relevant to the area being treated with radiotherapy. If you are unsure exactly which area will be affected, please ask your radiographer for advice.

[Please follow these simple instructions to help take care of your skin and keep reactions to a minimum:](#)

### Washing

Use warm or tepid water while showering or bathing, avoiding any extremes of temperature, and use a mild, unperfumed soap such as Simple or baby soap. Aqueous cream can also be used for washing, but please check any other products with your radiographers before using them. Try not to soak the treatment area in the bath for a long time, and avoid using a washcloth or sponge on the area.

Be gentle with the area when drying. Use a soft towel to pat the skin dry being careful not to rub and taking particular care with folds of skin, such as those under the arm and under the breast. It is not recommended to use talcum powder in the treatment area.

### Moisturising

E45 cream is the recommended moisturiser for use during treatment and can be applied as often as you want, though make sure it is fully absorbed before any treatment appointment. Check any other products with your radiographers before using them as not all skincare products are suitable for use during treatment. Please also let them know if you are using any creams or lotions for a pre-existing skin condition before your treatment begins.

[If your skin appears to be getting worse after radiotherapy, please do not hesitate to contact us or see your GP surgery for advice and dressings if required.](#)

### Deodorant

Please do not use a spray deodorant or body spray in the area being treated. If you do use a deodorant, it must be one that does not contain metal or alcohol, such as a crystal or mineral deodorant stick. Most other deodorants are aluminium based. Please check with your radiographer before using any deodorant or other product if you are unsure, and stop using all types of deodorant if your skin becomes red or sore.

### Hair

We advise that you do not use any method of underarm hair removal on the side that you are receiving radiotherapy. If it is possible in your case, your radiographer will be able to let you know.

### General tiredness

Coming for radiotherapy every day for a number of weeks can be very tiring. We recommend that you balance rest time with a gentle exercise regime, such as a 20 minute walk per day, to manage your fatigue. Eating a normal, healthy diet and drinking at least two litres of fluid a day can also help. If you are feeling extreme tiredness, please speak to the radiographers for advice. Most tired 10 days to 2 weeks after radiotherapy.

## Other considerations

### Radioactivity

External radiotherapy in no way makes you radioactive. It is perfectly safe for you to be with other people, including children and pregnant women throughout your treatment.

### Diet

We advise that you eat a normal, healthy, balanced diet throughout your treatment. You will need to drink more fluids than normal to keep you hydrated. If you would like more advice on your diet during your treatment, please ask your radiographer.

### Clothing

When possible wear loose fitting clothing made of natural fibres such as cotton or silk, over the treatment area. This will help to reduce irritation. Try to avoid wearing a bra when you can and if you do, choose a soft cotton one with no under-wire. Special bras can be bought, ask your radiographer for advice.

If you have had a mastectomy, you may find it more comfortable to wear a soft lightweight bra and a temporary

lightweight prosthesis rather than a silicone one during the treatment stage and for about six weeks afterwards. A clean cotton or silk handkerchief placed under the breast or between a prosthesis and the chest can help to prevent friction and absorb any moisture produced by the skin.

### Swimming

It's fine to swim in the sea or a swimming pool during your treatment. You just need to rinse the treated area carefully after swimming to remove any chlorine or salt and moisturise using E45 cream. You are strongly advised not to swim if your skin becomes red or sore, or if the radiographers tell you that you are at high risk of developing a skin reaction.

### Sun exposure

You should avoid exposing the area receiving radiotherapy to the sun during treatment and until all skin reactions have gone. Please do not use any sun protection cream during your radiotherapy treatment. It is better to protect your skin by staying in the shade and covering up with clothing.

The area of skin that has been treated will always be more sensitive to the sun. Once your treatment has finished and the skin side effects have settled, you should always protect the treated area by using at least SPF 50 sun block/cover up.



## Further information

If you would like more information or have any other questions, don't hesitate to ask your radiographer or consultant. We are happy to help and want to ensure that your radiotherapy treatment is as comfortable and trouble free as possible.

We can also help you with access to useful websites including our Cancer Partners UK website:

[www.cancerpartnersuk.org](http://www.cancerpartnersuk.org)

[www.macmillan.org.uk](http://www.macmillan.org.uk)



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