

*Northwestern
Memorial
Hospital has
programs that
help recovery.*

Radiation Therapy For Breast Cancer

You and your doctor have chosen radiation therapy as part of your breast cancer treatment. This information will help you understand:

- What to expect.
- How to care for your skin during treatment.
- How to reduce side-effects.

Treatment Schedule

Most radiation therapy consists of 25 to 35 daily treatments, given Monday through Friday over 5½ to 7 weeks. Your therapist will work with you to set up daily appointment times, each lasting 10 to 20 minutes. While the actual treatment takes only a few minutes, it is best to allow an hour for:

- X-rays.
- Meetings with your doctor or nurse.
- Any unexpected delays.

If you have any questions or concerns, please ask your doctor or nurse.

Your first appointment may begin with X-rays. This is done to confirm the treatment field before radiation starts. X-rays often are done weekly to assure therapy precision. However, these X-rays do not assess the treatment effects.

You will meet with your doctor or nurse at least once a week on _____. Your treatment and side-effects are monitored during these visits. Any concerns about your disease and treatment can be discussed at this time.

Skin Marks

Often, tattoos or ink pen marks are used to precisely identify the radiation site. To prevent loss of the marks, medical tape may be placed over the ink. Do not remove the tape or marks. If your marks start to fade, please tell your therapist. Do not redraw them yourself. If you are allergic to tape, tell your therapist or nurse.

Skin Care

Radiation affects each patient in a different way. With proper care, skin reactions may be lessened, but not always avoided. Tanning of the skin is seen after 1 to 2 weeks of treatment. Sometimes a rash may occur in the treatment field.

After 3 to 4 weeks, your skin may become red and itch or burn. You may note more severe reactions after 4 to 5 weeks. Once the therapy is over your skin begins to heal.

Bathing

You may shower or take a tub bath. Use a mild soap for dry or sensitive skin (e.g., Dove[®], Camay[®], Tone[®], Oil of Olay[®], Basis[®], Caress[®], Neutrogena[®]). Wash the treated area with your hand rather than a rough wash cloth or loofah. Avoid hot water, which can irritate and dry your skin. Gently pat the treated area dry with a soft towel. Be sure to dry any creases, especially under the arm and breast.

Deodorants

Many deodorants and antiperspirants have warning labels about their use on red, irritated skin. Avoid these products on the treatment side. Deodorant options include:

- Body powder made of cornstarch and baking soda, which should be applied to dry skin.
- Alra[®], which is designed for patients receiving radiation.

Shaving

Do not shave the underarm on the treatment side during radiation treatment.

Sun Exposure

Protect any treated area from the sun both during and after radiation to prevent severe sunburns. (The sun produces ultraviolet radiation that can cause severe sunburns.) Wear protective clothing over the treated area and apply a minimum SPF 15 (UVA, UVB) sunscreen to non-treated areas to guard against sunburn.

Swimming

Exercise is important to your health and well-being. However, chlorine in swimming pools may dry and irritate your skin. If your skin becomes very red, avoid swimming pools. Otherwise, gently wash chlorine off after swimming.

Skin Creams

Several creams can be used during radiation to aid healing. Check with your doctor or nurse before using any skin care product.

Mild to Moderate Skin Reactions

Biafine Cream[®] promotes healing during radiation. Other products include Natural Care Gel[®] and Special Care Cream[®]. Ask your doctor or nurse how to use these creams. As directed, apply the cream to the entire treatment area, using a thin layer _____ times per day. Do not apply the cream less than 2 hours before treatment. A steroid cream/ointment may be prescribed to provide relief from itching.

Severe Skin Reactions

Sometimes severe redness or blistering may occur during the final weeks of treatment. Blistering (moist desquamation) most often occurs under the breast or underarm. If this occurs, tell your doctor, nurse or radiation therapist.

A thick layer of Aquaphor[®] often provides relief and comfort. (You may cover the area with a dressing to protect your clothing.) Your doctor may prescribe a steroid cream/ointment or Silvadene[®], a burn cream. (Domeboro[®] soaks may help clean and soothe the area before applying a cream.) Your nurse will explain all of these treatments. If you are having pain, please contact your doctor or nurse. Often ibuprofen (Advil[®]), acetaminophen (Tylenol[®]) or naproxen (Aleve[®]) will provide relief.

Swelling

Radiation treatments may increase swelling of the breast, although most patients have no swelling. The swelling may cause tenderness and discomfort. Avoid sleeping on the treated side and wear a good supportive bra. Breast edema may last for several months after treatment.

If lymph nodes were removed, ask your nurse about arm and shoulder exercise precautions. Tell your doctor or nurse about any arm swelling. Lymphedema (swelling) often begins slowly, and may be noted after an injury, insect bite, burn, muscle strain or infection of the arm. Swelling is at first improved by elevating the affected limb. Avoid using the affected arm for heavy lifting and household and yard chores, such as scrubbing, shoveling or raking.

Clothing

Avoid rough-textured clothes that may cause itching. Wear washable clothes over any pen markings. Avoid very tight-fitting clothes or tight seams over the breast or underarm. If you have pressure marks on your skin, try a different size or style.

Diet

Good nutrition helps maintain health during breast cancer treatment. Eat a normal diet. Talk with your doctor or nurse about any diet therapies. Food intake should be based on your lifestyle and personal preference. Do not take vitamin doses above the federal recommended daily allowance. High doses of certain vitamins and herbs may interfere with the effectiveness of radiation. If 5 servings of different fruits and vegetables are not part of your diet, a multivitamin is suggested. A dietitian can assist if you have any questions about your diet or if weight loss is a problem. Please ask your nurse for more information.

Fatigue

Fatigue is a common side-effect of radiation treatment but varies with each patient. Stress about your illness, daily trips for treatment and the effects of radiation on normal cells may add to fatigue. Fatigue is often more severe at the end of the week and seems to improve over the weekend. Many women continue to work during treatment, some with minor changes in their normal routines.

Keep active and exercise. Plan activities early in the week and in the morning, when energy levels are higher. Try to keep regular hours, getting up at the same time every day. Remember to not over-exert yourself. Listen to your body's needs. For more information about fatigue, talk with your doctor or nurse.

Menopause

Signs of menopause may occur after estrogen replacement is stopped, during chemotherapy or with tamoxifen therapy. These signs often include "hot flashes," night sweats, trouble sleeping or mood swings. There are medicines that can help. Talk with your nurse or doctor.

Smoking

Nicotine from smoking increases radiation side-effects and interferes with your body's ability to recover from surgery or radiation. If you need help quitting, please talk with your doctor or nurse. Northwestern Memorial's Center for Integrative Medicine offers individual and group smoking cessation programs. To learn more about these programs, call 312-926-3627.

Your Well-Being

While breast cancer may be cured if detected early, it may have an effect on your physical and mental well-being. Talking with a professional about breast cancer and its impact on your life often helps healing. A licensed social worker is available during the day and by appointment. Northwestern Memorial's Wellness Institute offers programs that help recovery. Talking to women who have completed breast cancer therapy provides encouragement and insight into treatment in a way that your healthcare team may not. Accurate information about the disease and its treatment aids recovery.

Resources

Other Support and Recovery Programs

Radiation Oncology Social Worker 312-926-2520

Breast Cancer Network of Strength 312-364-9071

Reach to Recovery (American Cancer Society) 1-800-ACS-2345

Gilda's Club 312-464-9900

General Information

American Cancer Society 1-800-ACS-2345

National Cancer Institute 1-800-4-CANCER

<http://www.cancer.org>

Health Information Resources

For more information, visit one of Northwestern Memorial Hospital's Health Learning Centers. These state-of-the-art health libraries are located on the third floor of the Galter Pavilion and on the first floor of the Prentice Women's Hospital. Health information professionals are available to help you find the information you need and provide you with personalized support at no charge. You may contact the Health Learning Centers by calling 312-926-LINK (5465) or by sending an e-mail to hlc@nmh.org.

For additional information about Northwestern Memorial Hospital, please visit our Web site at www.nmh.org.

Para asistencia en español, por favor llamar a el departamento de representantes para pacientes al 312-926-3112.

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Developed by: Department of Radiation Oncology

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For more information about Northwestern Memorial Hospital, please visit www.nmh.org.

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