Radiation Therapy For Breast Cancer

You and your doctor have chosen radiation therapy as part of your breast cancer treatment. This handout describes:

- What to expect.
- How to care for your skin during treatment.
- How to reduce side-effects and increase your comfort during therapy.

Treatment Schedule

Most radiation therapy consists of 25 to 35 daily treatments, given Monday through Friday. 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 are often done weekly to ensure therapy precision.

You will meet with your doctor 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. Wear washable clothes over any pen markings.

Skin Care

Radiation affects each person differently. During your therapy, you may notice skin changes in the treated area.

- During the first 1 to 2 weeks, your skin may tan. Sometimes a rash will develop.
- After 3 to 4 weeks, the skin may become red, dry and itchy, or burn. It may also peel.
• After 4 to 5 weeks, more reddening or blistering may occur under the breast or underarm.
• Your skin will begin to heal when therapy is over.

With proper care, skin reactions may be lessened. To ease discomfort and protect your skin from more irritation, follow these guidelines to care for the skin affected by radiation therapy:

• Clean the area with a mild soap for dry or sensitive skin. Some suggested soaps are Basis® for Sensitive Skin, Dove® for Sensitive Skin, Camay®, Cetaphil®, or Oil of Olay®. Avoid soaps that are heavily scented or anti-bacterial.
• Use lukewarm water. Hot water can cause more irritation.
• Gently clean the area with the palm of your hand or a very soft cloth.
• Pat your skin dry. Do not rub.
• Be sure to completely dry any creases, especially under the arm and breast.
• Do not shave the underarm (on the treatment side).
• Do not use heating pads or ice packs. Extreme temperatures can cause more damage.
• Do not expose your skin to the sun. (See Clothing.)

Skin Cream
Skin creams are often used to soothe and aid healing. However:

• **Do not apply any cream within 2 hours of your radiation treatment.**
• Check with your doctor or nurse before using any skin care product.
• When used, be sure to apply a thin layer of cream to the entire treatment area, 3 to 4 times per day. (See picture.)

Commonly used creams are:
• Miaderm® (available only at our hospital pharmacy).
• Aquaphor®.
• Aloe vera.
In some cases, your doctor may prescribe other treatments, such as:

- Steroid cream/ointment.
- Silvadene® (a cream for burns).
- Domeboro® soaks. This helps clean and soothe the area before applying a cream.

During the last few weeks of treatment, severe redness or blistering may occur 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 nurse will explain any treatments prescribed by your doctor.

If you are having pain, please contact your doctor or nurse. Often, ibuprofen (Advil®), acetaminophen (Tylenol®), or naproxen (Aleve®) will provide relief.

**Deodorants**
Before using, check for warning labels against use on red, irritated skin. Do not use those on your treatment side. Options to using deodorant include:

- Alra® (available at the hospital’s Walgreens).
- Tom’s of Maine®.
- Other natural, metal-free products.

Do not use deodorant within 2 hours of treatment (on the affected side).

**Swimming**
Exercise is important to your health and well-being. However, chlorine in swimming pools may dry and irritate the skin. Be sure to gently wash the chlorine off after swimming. Once the treated skin becomes red, **avoid** swimming pools.

**Swelling**
Radiation treatments may sometimes cause breast swelling (edema). The skin may then feel sore or tender. To reduce the effects, avoid sleeping on the treated side and wear a good supportive bra. Edema may last several months after treatment is completed.

If your lymph nodes were removed, you may be at risk for arm swelling (lymphedema). Ask your nurse about arm precautions and exercises to prevent this. If you do notice arm swelling, elevate your arm above the level of the heart and tell your doctor or nurse right away. Lymphedema often begins slowly, and may occur after an injury, insect bite, burn, muscle strain, or arm infection.

**Do not** use the affected arm for heavy lifting, or for household and yard chores, such as scrubbing, shoveling, or raking.

**Clothing**
Choose clothing made of cotton or other soft knit fabrics. Certain fabrics like wool may be irritating. Loose-fitting clothes are more comfortable. Avoid clothes that fit tightly over the breast or underarm. If your clothes leave a pressure mark on your skin, try a different size or style.
Wear protective clothing to avoid sun exposure to the treated area both during and after therapy. The sun produces ultraviolet radiation that can cause severe sunburn. Apply SPF 15 to non-treated areas to prevent sunburn.

**Diet and Supplements**

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 daily 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 not to over-exert yourself. Listen to your body’s needs. For more information about fatigue, talk with your doctor or nurse.

**Hormones**

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.

Questions? Concerns?

You can call the Department of Radiation Therapy at 312-472-3650 Monday through Friday, 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

Resources

Support and Recovery Programs
  Radiation Oncology Social Worker 312-926-4884
  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
  www.cancer.org

Breast Cancer Resources

Dieticians
For patients who wish to see an oncology dietician, contact one of the following:
  Supportive Oncology
  Prentice Women’s Hospital, Lurie Cancer Center, 4th floor
  312-472-5823

  Lifestyle Medicine
  Hematology-Oncology Associates of Illinois
  676 North Saint Clair Street
  312-695-2300

Cancer Physical Rehabilitation
The Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago (for referrals related to lymphedema)
  1-800-354-REHAB
Social Work
  Department of Radiation Oncology
  312-926-4884

American Cancer Society
  800-227-2345

Lurie Cancer Center
  312-472-5820

Cancer Support Organizations
Peer Support:
  Imerman Angels
  www.imermanangels.org
  1-866-IMERMAN (463-7626)

  Cancer Hope Network
  www.cancerhopenetwork.org
  1-800-552-4366

Wellness Centers
Free cancer support for patients and loved ones, including support groups for adults and children. To search for a center near to you:
  www.cancerwellness.org

National Organizations
  Susan G. Komen for the Cure
  www.komen.org
  1-877-GO KOMEN

Health Information Resources
For more information, visit Northwestern Memorial Hospital’s Alberto Culver Health Learning Center. This state-of-the-art health library is located on the 3rd floor of the Galter Pavilion. 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 Center by calling 312-926-LINK (5465) or by sending an e-mail to hlc@nm.org.

For additional information about Northwestern Medicine, please visit our website at nm.org.