

*Northwestern  
Memorial  
Hospital has  
programs that  
help recovery.*

## Radiation Therapy For Breast Cancer

You and your physician 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 15 to 35 daily treatments, given Monday through Friday. Your therapist will work with you to set up daily appointment times, each lasting 10 to 30 minutes. While the actual treatment takes only a few minutes, it is best to allow an hour for:

- X-rays
- Meetings with your physician or nurse
- Any unexpected delays

If you have any questions or concerns, please ask your physician 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 during treatment to ensure therapy precision.

You will meet with your physician 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 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 or become reddened. 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 slowly 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:

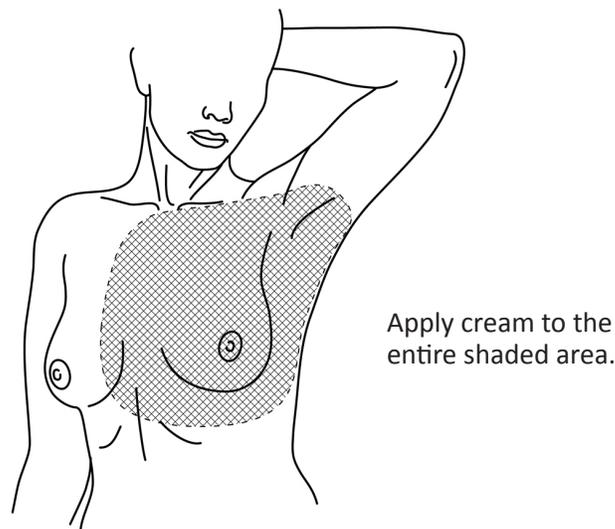
- Clean the area with a mild, unscented soap for dry or sensitive skin. Some suggested soaps are Basis® for Sensitive Skin, Dove® for Sensitive Skin, Camay®, Cetaphil® or Oil of Olay®. Avoid antibacterial soap.
- Use lukewarm water. Hot water can cause more irritation.
- Gently clean the area with the 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 creams***

Skin creams are often used to soothe and aid healing. Check with your physician or nurse before using any skin care product. We will prescribe a topical skin cream known as mometasone for you.

You should use mometasone 2 times a day starting on your first day, after your treatment. First, apply a thin layer of the mometasone to your skin in the shaded area (Figure 1). Then, a moisturizer should be applied to the same area following the mometasone.

**Figure 1**



Use one of the following suggested moisturizers:

- Miaderm® (available online and at the hospital Walgreens)
- Aquaphor®
- Aloe vera (without alcohol)

**Do not apply any cream within 2 hours before your radiation treatment.**

During the last few weeks of treatment, severe redness or blistering may occur under the breast or underarm. If this occurs, tell your physician, 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 physician.

If you are having pain, please contact your healthcare provider. They may suggest ibuprofen (Advil®), acetaminophen (Tylenol®) or naproxen (Aleve®) for pain relief.

### ***Deodorants***

Before using, check for warning labels against use on red, irritated skin. Do not use 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). If you do notice arm swelling, elevate your arm above the level of the heart and tell your physician 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. 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 physician 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. 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 make you more tired. Fatigue is often worse at the end of the week and seems to improve over the weekend.

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. Listen to your body's needs. For more information about fatigue, talk with your physician 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 physician or nurse.

## **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 physician or nurse. The Lurie Cancer Center Supportive Oncology Program offers smoking cessation programs. The Tobacco Treatment Specialist can be reached for an appointment at 312.921.7848.

## **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.

## **For questions or concerns**

You can call the Department of Radiation Therapy at 312.472.3650 Monday through Friday, 8:00 am to 4:30 pm and after hours for emergencies.

## **Resources**

### **Support and recovery programs**

Radiation Oncology Social Worker 312.926.4884

Reach to Recovery (American Cancer Society) 1.800.227.2345 (1.800.ACS.2345)

Gilda's Club 312.464.9900

### **General information**

American Cancer Society 1.800.227.2345 (1.800.ACS.2345)

National Cancer Institute 1.800.422.6237 (1.800.4.CANCER)

cancer.org

## **Breast cancer resources**

### **Northwestern Medicine dietitians**

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

Center for Lifestyle Medicine

Hematology Oncology Associates of Illinois

676 North Saint Clair Street

312.695.2300

### **Cancer physical rehabilitation**

Shirley Ryan Ability Lab (for referrals related to lymphedema)

Dr. Samman Shahpar

1.844.355.ABLE

### **Social work**

Northwestern Medicine 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  
imermanangels.org  
1.866.463.7626 (1.866.IMERMAN)

Cancer Hope Network  
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, go to [cancerwellness.org](http://cancerwellness.org)

## **National organizations**

Susan G. Komen for the Cure  
komen.org  
1.877.465.6636 (1.877.GO KOMEN)