



Government of **Western Australia**
North Metropolitan Health Service
Sir Charles Gairdner Osborne Park Health Care Group



Breast treatment Radiation Oncology

Patient information



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Introduction

Radiation therapy is often given to patients with cancers that arise in the breast region. It may be given on its own or in conjunction with other types of treatment, such as surgery, chemotherapy or hormone therapy.

Treatment involves a series of outpatient treatments given for up to five days a week over several weeks. It is painless and although the appointment times may be for 10 to 20 minutes in duration, the treatment itself only takes a few minutes.

The treatment varies from patient to patient and invariably causes some reactions within the body's normal tissues. Your radiation oncologist, a specialist doctor who uses radiation therapy in the treatment of cancer patients, will explain these to you in more detail.

This brochure outlines common side effects and suggest ways to minimise them. If required, your doctor will prescribe medications to soothe reactions that may take place.

Possible reactions

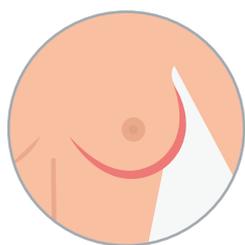
When radiation therapy is delivered, it has to pass through normal structures to reach the treatment area. As a result, reactions in normal tissues within the treatment area can be expected to occur to some degree.

Individual patients will have different reactions, depending on the site to be treated, the dose given, the number of treatments and their overall health. Reactions may also be influenced to a greater extent by other forms of treatment given; for example, reactions are likely to be greater if chemotherapy is given at the same time as radiation therapy.

Usually, reactions would not be expected until the second or third week of treatment. They are likely to persist throughout the treatment and subside a couple of weeks after treatment is completed.

You will have regular reviews during your treatment. These appointment times will be included in your treatment schedule. In between the review appointments you are encouraged to mention any treatment-related issues that you have with the radiation therapists or nursing staff, who will be able to offer advice or refer you to the appropriate person/area.

Common side-effects include:



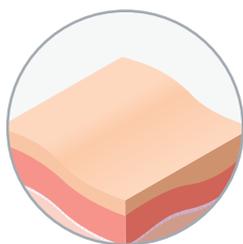
Breast reactions



Throat/oesophagus reactions



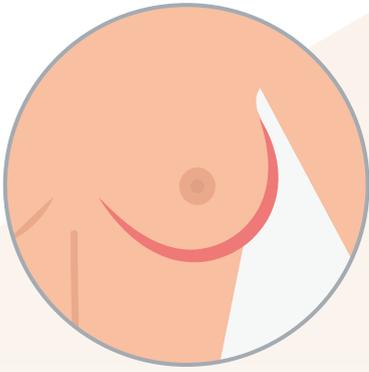
Lymphoedema



Skin reactions



Fatigue



Breast reactions

The breast often responds to radiotherapy with some leakage of fluid into the tissues. This fluid leakage is known as oedema and will often be felt as a sensation of heaviness in the breast. Rarely, the oedema can be quite marked and results in stretching of the overlying skin of the breast and nipple swelling.

Oedema can start to develop in the second week of treatment and may increase as the treatment progresses. Some degree of oedema often persists after treatment, sometimes for many months. Little can be done to reduce oedema caused by radiation therapy. If discomfort due to heaviness develops, some relief can be achieved by increasing the support given to the breast during the day.

Discomfort in the breast, particularly in areas of scar tissue, is quite common. This is due to the nerves repairing after surgery. This may present as pain in the form of a sharp, stabbing sensation.

If you have any concerns regarding pain in your breast or swelling, please discuss these with the radiation therapists, nursing staff or your doctor as a specialist trained in oedema management can be helpful.



Throat/oesophagus reactions

If the prescribed treatment includes the lymph nodes in the neck, inflammation within the throat/oesophagus can occur, resulting in a sore throat, the sensation of a lump in the throat or heartburn. Please inform the radiation therapists, nursing staff or your doctor if this occurs so that medication can be prescribed as needed.

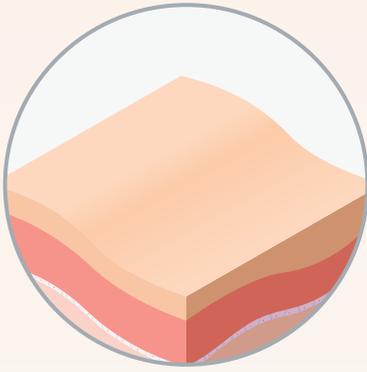


Lymphoedema

There is a very small risk of arm or chest swelling called lymphoedema occurring within the first 18 months after the start of cancer treatment. It can also occur some years after the treatment, although this is less common.

Lymphoedema is more common in patients who have had lymph nodes removed. Early warning signs include swelling following exercise or physical activity, a feeling of heaviness, tightness, discomfort or aching.

Specially prescribed stretching exercises and massage at the appropriate time can help your recovery. Further advice regarding the prevention of lymphoedema is available. Please let the nursing staff know if you notice any of these changes and/or you are intending to travel by plan after treatment.



Skin reactions

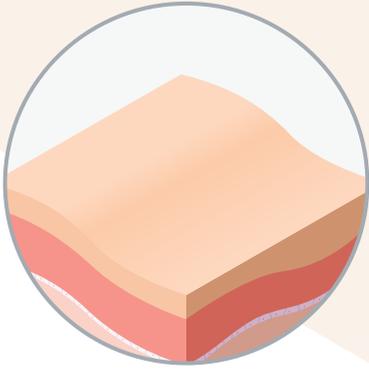
Some degree of reddening (erythema) usually develops in the treated area about 10 to 14 days after the first treatment. Reactions are generally mild and present like sunburn, which can be relieved by a soothing cream such as Sorbolene. There may be some mild darkening in pigmentation of the skin. Your radiation therapist can indicate where the reactions are likely to occur.

The areas more likely to be affected include the sensitive skin in the fold beneath the breast, the nipple and, in some cases, the skin in your armpits.

The following suggestions may help minimise reactions.

- Gently wash skin in the treatment area with lukewarm water and a non-perfumed gentle soap such as Simple soap, Unscented Dove, or a non-soap wash such as QV wash.
- Use unscented deodorants, such as Ego QV Naked, Nivea Sensitive Protect, Dove Unscented or Mitchum Unscented.
- Do not rub vigorously, shave or exfoliate in the treatment area.
- Gently pat the skin dry using a soft towel – do not rub.
- When you start treatment, moisturise with the Sorbolene cream (or similar) provided. Apply twice a day in the entire treatment area and gently massage into the skin until it is absorbed. Apply the cream two hours before your treatment and keep in the fridge for greater soothing. If you have not been given this cream, please ask the radiation therapists or nursing staff. Alternative soothing creams can be provided if the area becomes itchy or sore.
- If you do wish to try another method of skin protection, please discuss with your doctor or a nurse first.
- Wear loose-fitting clothes as tight clothing can irritate the affected areas. Wear a loose cotton bra without underwire or a crop top instead of tight-fitting or underwire bras.
- Avoid exposure of the affected area to direct sunlight.
- When swimming outdoors, always cover the treatment area with a cotton T-shirt or rashie. Swimming in chlorinated pools may worsen skin reactions. If you do wish to swim in a chlorinated pool, it is advisable to shower and change into dry clothes as soon as possible after your swim.

You will have regular skin checks during your treatment. However, please report to a nurse, radiation therapist or your doctor if you experience itching, irritation or blistering, so that extra care and advice can be given.



Skin care after radiation therapy

Changes can be at their worst about a week or so after your treatment finishes. The skin reddening usually subsides a few weeks after your treatment has finished and by 4 to 6 weeks the skin should be healing well.

Sometimes it does so with some dryness or dry peeling, not unlike the peeling that occurs after sunburn. Continue applying moisturiser several times a day during this period.

Some degree of pigmentation of the skin may develop, particularly in the pores, which often leads to a mild discolouration of the skin for two or three months.

Your skin will be more susceptible to sun damage after radiotherapy. It is recommended to wear loose-fitting clothing to protect you from direct sunlight for 18 months to 2 years after treatment. A maximum sunblock lotion (at least SPF+30) is recommended after this time and care to avoid burning should always be exercised.



Fatigue

Fatigue associated with treatment can occur at any time during the treatment, but in general usually develops as the course of radiation therapy progresses. There can be many causes, but the main one is your body requires extra energy to heal healthy cells.

Daily travelling, working and running a household can also contribute to this tiredness. You may find that you generally slow down and don't have as much energy. This tiredness may be worse if you are also having chemotherapy.

Ensure you have adequate sleep, allow time to rest and drink plenty of fluids. Mild forms of exercise, such as walking, can be beneficial, especially if you make it social by involving friends or family. There are exercise programs that benefit patients with fatigue. Please ask staff for further information.

This tiredness may continue for a period after you have finished your course of radiation therapy, but this is normal.



Chemotherapy

Chemotherapy can be recommended in addition to surgery and radiation therapy. Reactions to chemotherapy vary for each individual - your doctor will discuss this in detail with you.

If there is any change to your chemotherapy schedule, it is important that you make the staff in Radiation Oncology aware of this immediately.



Pregnancy

It is strongly recommended that women use a reliable form of birth control during and shortly after treatment. Radiation therapy can be harmful to the unborn baby. Please inform a staff member immediately if you suspect that you may be pregnant.

Helpful exercises

For your radiation therapy treatment, we require you to have both arms raised behind your head out of the way of the treatment fields. After surgery some discomfort and tightness may affect your ability to move your shoulder and arm fully.

An active exercise program is encouraged to restore shoulder mobility and enable you to hold your arms in the required position comfortably. The more mobility you have, the easier it will be for you. These simple and gentle exercises can help:



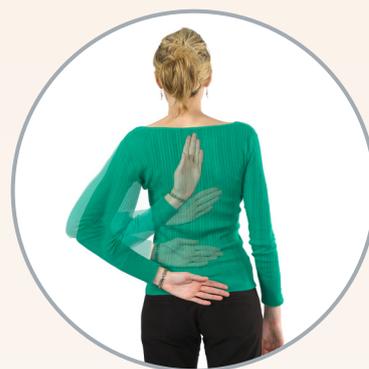
1. Arms upward lift

Clasp both hands in front of you. With elbows bent, lift your hands above your head as high as is comfortable. Stretch, and slowly lower.



2. Elbows out

Lie on your back with your hands behind your head, and your elbows pointing up to the ceiling. Move your elbow out to the side as far as is comfortable. Stretch and return to the middle. In a sitting or standing position, place your hands on your shoulders and move elbows up and down.



3. Hands behind back

Sit or stand with your arm behind your back. Move your thumb up your back as high as is comfortable until you feel a stretch, then lower.

It is recommended that these exercises are undertaken frequently throughout the day, but please discuss these with your doctor or the nursing staff. If physiotherapy is required, this can be arranged.



Emotional wellbeing

It is completely normal for you to feel emotional for some time after the diagnosis of cancer. Sleeping, eating and mood disturbances are all quite common under the circumstances.

Try spending time with people who make you feel good, relax and do things you enjoy. Try to exercise regularly and say no to those activities you don't feel like doing.

You should tell the radiation therapists or nursing team if you feel you are having difficulty coping with your diagnosis and treatment. Financial help or help with travel arrangements can be discussed with a social worker or welfare officer. Please discuss with the nurses.

Follow-up appointment

When radiation therapy is completed, your doctor will organise a follow-up appointment. If you experience any problems related to your treatment after the completion of treatment and before your follow-up appointment, please contact the department on (08) 6383 3000, Monday to Friday from 8am to 4pm.

This brochure discusses common problems or reactions that may occur when having radiation therapy to the skin. Not all reactions described will occur in every situation and every attempt will be made to reduce or relieve any reactions.

For further clarification or information on the treatment side effects outlined in this brochure, feel free to ask any of the radiation therapists, nurses, doctors or registrars.

Further support

There are many services offering support to people undergoing cancer treatments.

These include:

Look Good Feel Better

Free call: 1800 650 960

Website: www.lgfb.org.au

Look Good, Feel Better is a free workshop run by professionals from the cosmetics industry for women. The practical workshop covers skincare, make-up and headwear demonstrations and participants receive a complimentary Confidence Kit full of skincare and make-up products.

Experienced volunteers from the beauty industry help show how to manage the changes that may occur to the skin, hair and general appearance as a result of treatment.

Workshops are run frequently in the Radiation Oncology Department. Please speak to the radiation therapists or nursing staff if you are interested in attending.

WA Psycho-Oncology Service

Phone: (08) 6457 1177

Email: wapos@health.wa.gov.au

This service is available to adult Western Australians diagnosed with cancer. Clinical psychologists apply psychological theory and evidenced-based assessment and treatment strategies to help people address their needs and meet their goals. You may self-refer or ask a health professional to refer you.

Cancer Council WA

Phone: 131 120

Website: www.cancerwa.asn.au

The charity works across every area of every cancer, from research to prevention and support, assisting people from diagnosis through treatment and beyond.



Healthdirect

Phone: 1800 022 222

Website: www.healthdirect.gov.au

This free 24-hour health service offers general guidance for patients, including symptoms, diagnosis and treatment options.

Solaris Cancer Care

Phone: (08) 6383 3475

Website: <https://solariscancercare.org.au>

DD block,
Ground floor,
Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital,
Hospital Avenue, Nedlands

Solaris Cancer Care provides up-to-date, practical, evidence-based information on complementary integrative approaches to cancer management, disease prevention, health and wellbeing activities and support services that are designed to help people feel and cope better with their cancer and treatment.

Cancer Australia

Phone: 1800 624 973

Website: www.canceraustralia.gov.au

Established by the Australian Government to benefit Australians affected by cancer.

Cancer Network WA

Phone: (08) 6457 0855

Website: [North Metropolitan Health Service - Cancer Network WA](#)

Breast Cancer Care WA

Phone: (08) 9324 3703

Website: www.breastcancer.org.au

WA-based charity that provides personalised emotional, practical and financial support and care to people affected by breast cancer.

Breast Cancer Network Australia

Phone: 1800 500 258

Website: www.bcna.org.au

National organisation providing information for breast cancer-related treatments, including key resources and services and latest research.

Australasian Lymphology Association

Phone: 1300 935 332

Website: www.lymphoedema.org.au

References

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5. Prophylaxis and management of acute radiation-induced skin reactions: a systematic review of the literature. Salvo, N., Barnes, E., van Draanen J, et al. (2010). Current Oncology 17(4):94-112.
6. <https://www.eviq.org.au/patients-and-carers/radiotherapy-patient-information-sheets/3101-skin-changes-and-skin-care-during-radiotherap>

Radiation Oncology

Cancer Centre
Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital

Gairdner Drive
Nedlands WA 6009

Phone: (08) 6383 3000,
Monday to Friday, 8am to 4pm



The information provided is for information purposes only. If you are a patient using this publication, you should seek assistance from a healthcare professional when interpreting these materials and applying them to your individual circumstances.

