

Radiotherapy for breast cancer

Radiotherapy Department Patient information

What is radiotherapy?

Your doctor has recommended you have radiotherapy. Radiotherapy is an effective treatment commonly used to treat cancer and other diseases. It can be used alone or with chemotherapy, surgery, or hormone therapy.

Radiotherapy is the use of high energy rays, usually x-rays. It works by destroying cancer cells in the treated area. It can also cause some damage to normal cells in the treatment area. This is why radiotherapy can have side effects. Giving the treatment as a course of short daily treatments gives the normal cells a chance to recover.

The number of treatments you will receive depends on your individual needs. It will be decided by the consultant or registrar at your clinic appointment. This information leaflet is intended as a guide. If you have any questions about your specific treatment, please ask any of the team looking after you.

Planning your radiotherapy

Planning is a very important part of radiotherapy. It ensures the radiotherapy is targeted accurately and causes the least damage to the surrounding healthy tissues.

You will receive an appointment for a radiotherapy planning CT scan that will form part of the measurement process. The planning session usually takes 30 minutes. For this scan you will be positioned exactly as you will be every day for your treatment. During this appointment, pen marks are drawn onto the skin which will be used to plan your treatment accurately.

After this appointment you will be given a date to start your radiotherapy. This will usually be a couple of weeks later as the planning process is a complex procedure. You will also be given a telephone appointment for a new patient clinic which will be booked to coincide with the start of your radiotherapy. This is a good opportunity for you to ask any further questions you may have thought of. You are welcome to have a family member or friend with you for this telephone call.

Treatment

The radiographers will position you carefully on the couch in the same position as you were in when your treatment was planned. This is done by using a red light which shines onto your body. Your chest area will need to be free of clothing so you can be positioned accurately. You will need to lie very still but breathe normally. You will not feel anything during the radiotherapy - it is very similar to having an x-ray taken.

The radiographers will need to leave the room while the radiation is on, but they can see you through a camera and hear you through the intercom. The treatment can be interrupted if needed. Music can be played to help you relax if you would like it.

The whole appointment usually takes about 15 minutes. Routine checks will be carried out on some days which may extend the time slightly.

A note for patients of reproductive age: it is important that you are not, or do not become, pregnant while receiving treatment. Please continue to use contraception during treatment if necessary. If you have any concerns on this subject, please discuss them with your treatment radiographers or consultant.

Skin care advice

During your radiotherapy and for a while afterwards, you may experience skin changes in the area being treated. It may not be possible to stop a skin reaction, but by following this advice you should feel more comfortable. Please talk to your treatment team if you are experiencing problems so you can be given individual advice.

Reduce friction by:

- washing the skin gently in the treatment area with soap and water and patting the skin dry, avoiding rubbing the area.
- wearing loose fitting, natural fibre clothing to reduce discomfort.
- avoiding shaving and waxing in the area.

Reduce irritation by:

- using a moisturiser in the treatment area. One which does not contain sodium lauryl sulphate is better such as E45 cream. There is no need to wipe the moisturiser off before treatment.
- discontinuing the use of your usual deodorant if irritation occurs or skin is broken.
- avoiding topical antibiotics unless there is a known infection.
- avoiding sun exposure in the treatment area during radiotherapy and using a high factor sun cream following the completion of radiotherapy.
- avoiding extremes of temperature such as heating and cooling pad.

Other advice:

- You may swim if your skin isn't broken. Shower after swimming to wash off the chlorine and apply your moisturiser. Please stop swimming if it irritates your skin.
- Smoking is likely to make your skin reaction worse. If you need help to stop, please ask for advice.

Short term side effects

There are some side effects to radiotherapy. These tend to build up gradually towards the end of treatment. How severe the side effects are will vary from one person to another and depends on many factors. They will last for about two weeks after treatment is finished and then start to improve over the following months.

Please discuss any side effects you are experiencing with your treatment radiographers so your symptoms can be managed effectively. They are there to help you and can give you appropriate advice when you need it. During your treatment course you will also have a review appointment with your doctor or review radiographer. This is alongside your normal daily radiotherapy and will be on your appointment list. You will have the opportunity to discuss your side effects and to ask any questions you may have. The radiographers can arrange extra reviews for you if needed.

Expected: 50-100% (half to all) of people having radiotherapy

- **Tiredness:** this varies between patients and can be due to many factors. Distance travelled, upset to your usual routine, general health and depression/anxiety can cause tiredness. Also, the effects of the radiotherapy can play a part in the amount of fatigue experienced. Do as much as you feel able to and rest when you need to. Often light exercise such as a short walk can help.
- **Hair loss:** this will only occur in the treated area.

Common: 10-50% (10-50 in 100) of people having radiotherapy

- **Skin:** your skin may become pinker or darker. It may feel dry, tight, or sore. Sometimes a rash may appear and feel itchy. Following the skin care advice above will help to keep it more comfortable.

Less common: less than 10% (less than 10 in 100)

- **Aches and pains:** you may find you have twinges or sharp shooting pains in the treatment area. This is normal and may continue for a while after the treatment has finished.
- **Breast swelling and changes in texture:** the breast can become swollen during treatment and can feel harder to the touch. Swelling often settles a couple of months after treatment has finished.
- **Sore throat:** often mild and your usual pain relief can be taken if needed.

After your treatment course is finished, you will be given a follow up appointment to speak to the review radiographer and/or your breast cancer team. You will be followed up regularly for some time.

Longer term side effect

These can occur months to years after radiotherapy. The doctor who saw you for your initial appointment should have discussed them with you. Only a small number of patients will develop any of these long-term side effects. For most people these side effects are mild and do not affect everyday activities. However, a small number of people develop more severe effects.

Your radiotherapy is planned very carefully to avoid as much surrounding tissue as possible and minimise the risk of these side effects.

Common: 10-50% (10 to 50 in 100)

- **Changes in the breast:** slight shrinkage or firmness of the breast may happen. There can be a slight change in the colour of the skin which may be permanent.
- **Discomfort in the breast/chest wall or axilla (armpit):** there can be longer term aching and shooting nerve pain in the treatment area.

Less common: less than 10% (less than 10 in 100)

- **Breast/chest wall swelling:** the breast, or part of it, can become swollen, tender, more pink and warmer to the touch. This can happen several months after treatment. Contact your breast care nurse who may refer you to the lymphoedema service.
- **Reduced shoulder movement on the affected side:** carrying out shoulder exercises and using your arm normally will help keep the joint flexible.

- **Lymphoedema (swelling of the arm):** the likelihood will depend on the type of surgery you had. If you had surgery to remove the lymph nodes (glands) it is important to take particular care of the arm on the treated side. If your arm becomes swollen or you would like further information, please let a member of your team know. Your breast care nurse can refer you to the lymphoedema service.

Less common: less than 1% (less than 1 in 100)

- **Telangiectasia:** changes in the appearance of the skin can be caused when the tiny blood vessels under the skin become swollen. This looks like spidery marks.
- **Lung fibrosis:** radiotherapy can cause scarring of a small area of lung tissue which very rarely can cause breathlessness. Every effort is made to keep the amount of lung treated to a minimum.
- **Rib fractures:** the ribs can become brittle and more likely to break. This is extremely rare and will usually heal without any treatment.
- **Heart problems:** radiotherapy to the left breast may affect a small amount of heart tissue and increases the risk of heart disease by 1 - 2%. Every effort is made to exclude the heart from the treatment area.
- **Second malignancy:** radiotherapy is associated with a very small risk of developing a second cancer many years later. The benefits from the radiotherapy outweigh this very small risk, which is less than 1%.
- **Nerve damage:** this is extremely rare. It can cause numbness, pain and weakness in the arm and hand.

Emotional support

It is understandable to have feelings of anxiety, fear, or sadness during your treatment. The radiotherapy staff are there to support you and will always make time for your needs. If you're feeling down, it may help to talk with a friend or relative. Sometimes it can help to talk with someone outside the family who has been through a similar experience.

The Cancer Care Map is a website you can search for lots of local support groups. You can put in your post code to show support groups in your area.

Complementary therapies

The department has a range of free complementary therapies on offer to all patients. They can help you to cope with your treatment and aim to encourage the potential of self-healing and empowerment. If you would like further details, please speak to one of your radiographers, or you can call the complementary therapists directly on 0300 019 8268

Chapel

There is a Chapel within Poole Hospital which is open to people of all faiths. It is situated on level 1 of the hospital and is open 24 hours a day. If you would like to speak to a member of the chaplaincy team, you can call them directly on **0300 019 8153** or **0300 019 2167**.

Contact details

During treatment:

- If you need to contact the department during your course of radiotherapy you will find telephone numbers specific to your treatment unit at the bottom of your appointment list.

Radiotherapy helpline:

- For radiotherapy related enquiries after treatment there is the Dorset Radiotherapy Helpline (DORAH). This is an answerphone service which is checked regularly by qualified radiotherapy radiographers between 8am and 5.30pm but a message can be left at any time. Please call **0300 019 2481**. Please note this helpline is not for emergencies.

Oncology patient hotline:

- For urgent enquiries, day or night, contact the oncology patient hotline on **0300 019 4302**. If your call is not answered you will need to leave a message stating your name, hospital number and contact telephone number. You should be phoned back within half an hour - in the unlikely event that you are not, please call again.

Breast nurse specialists

Poole Hospital

Tel: **0300 019 2861**

Royal Bournemouth Hospital

Tel: **0300 019 4524**

Dorchester Hospital

Tel: **01305 255160**

For further information please contact:

Macmillan Cancer Support

89 Albert Embankment, London SE1 7UQ

Telephone: **0808 808 00 00**

www.macmillan.org.uk

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or email **uhd.patientexperienceteam@nhs.net**.

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