

Radiation Therapy for Breast Cancer

This handout offers information on the possible side effects from radiation therapy treatments.

For more information on radiation treatment, see the Canadian Cancer Society's booklet on Radiation Treatment: A Guide for People with Cancer. Go to the Canadian Cancer Society's website at cancer.ca and search for the name of the booklet.

After each radiation therapy treatment, it is safe for you to be around other people (including children) and pets. You are not radioactive.

We offer you and your family member/partner-in-care support during your treatments. We also answer any questions you have.

Side effects from radiation therapy treatment for breast cancer

Radiation therapy treatment side effects are not the same for everyone. The side-effects you have depends on:

- The part of your body treated,
- The type of radiation you are treated with
- The number of treatments you have and your general health.

Side effects may be caused by other treatments you are having. It is important you keep a healthy weight during your treatments. If you are having problems with this, ask to be referred to a dietitian.

The following information is about the side-effects you may have.

No energy/feeling tired

Radiation therapy treatments may cause you to feel tired. You may find your energy level is low.

What you can do to help:

- Keep your normal sleeping schedule. Wake up at the same time each day.
- A short nap (less than an hour) between 12 pm and 3 pm may give you more energy.
- Reduce your alcohol and caffeine in the afternoon and evening.
- Plan your day with time to rest before and after activities.
- Eat healthy foods. Eat small meals and snacks throughout the day.
- Drink 6 to 8 cups (1 cup = 250 ml) of liquid every day. This will help you stay hydrated.
- Keep active with about 30 minutes of exercise (example: walking) each day. If 30 minutes is too hard, split it up into shorter 5 to 10 minute sessions.

For more information, read the "How to Manage Your Fatigue" booklet found at cancercareontario.ca/en/symptom-management/3991

Skin symptoms

Radiation therapy treatments may cause you to have dry, itchy and or reddening of the skin in the treatment area. These symptoms are common in areas where there is friction or skin folds. You may have loss of hair in your axilla (arm pit).

Caring for your skin in the treatment area

You can:

- Wash your skin gently. Use an unscented soap and lukewarm water. Pat dry.
- Use water-based, lanolin free, and unscented lotions or creams to moisturize your skin.
- Wear soft, loose fitting clothing over your skin in the treatment area.
- Use an electric razor and not a disposable shaver to shave your skin in the treatment area.
- Apply deodorant or antiperspirant to your axilla (arm pits). Do not apply if you have any sores or open areas in your axilla.

Do not:

- Do not go swimming if you have sores or open areas on your skin in the treatment area.
- Do not use aftershave or perfume on your skin in the treatment area.
- Do not use baby powder or cornstarch on your skin in the treatment area.
- Do not use aloe vera on your skin in the treatment area.
- Do not use a heating pad or ice pack on your skin in the treatment area.
- Do not sit in a hot tub.
- Do not use adhesive tape or band-aids on your skin in the treatment area.
- Do not allow your skin surfaces to rub together or clothing to rub against your skin in the treatment area.
- Do not expose your skin in the treatment area to direct sun. Wear a wide brimmed hat and shirts that covers your skin in the treatment area. Stay in the shade if possible.
- Do not use sunscreen on your skin in the treatment area. After your treatment is finished and your skin has healed (no open areas) you may use sunscreen (SPF 30+).

It is important to let your healthcare team know if you have signs or symptoms of an infection (for example: a fever, drainage, or odour) of a sore or wound on your skin in the treatment area.

Saline Soak Instructions

Side effects of radiation therapy treatments may cause your skin to redden (like a sunburn) in the area that is treated. A saline soak helps add moisture to your skin to promote healing.

You need to put a saline soak on your reddened skin 3 to 4 times a day for 10 to 15 minutes each time. You need to continue the saline soaks until the area of your skin has healed. Plan to do a relaxing activity while you have your saline soak, such as phone a friend, listen to music, play relaxation tapes or have a nap.

What you need to make the saline solution

- A pot, water, a clean small bowl, salt, teaspoon, clean jar with a lid, and a clean lint-free soft cloth (a face cloth or reusable towel).

How to make the saline solution

1. Mix 4 cups (1 cup = 250 ml) of water with 1 teaspoon of salt in a pot.
2. Boil the water and salt for 10 minutes on the stove top. This makes the “saline solution”.
3. Let the saline solution cool down to room temperature.
4. Pour the saline solution into a clean jar. Close the jar with a lid or plastic wrap.
5. The jar of solution may be kept in the refrigerator or at room temperature.
6. Make a new saline solution every 24 hours (once a day).

How to put on the saline soak

1. Wash your hands.
2. Place the clean lint-free soft cloth in a clean bowl.
3. Pour the saline solution into the bowl until the cloth is wet.
4. Sit or lie down.
5. Uncover the reddened, cracked, or open area of your skin.
6. Gently squeeze the cloth to ring out excess water.
7. Put the cloth on the reddened, cracked, or open area of your skin for 10 to 15 minutes.
8. Remove the cloth. If it dries, pour on more saline solution before removing it from your skin.
9. Leave the area uncovered until it is dry.
10. Wash your hands.

Use a clean cloth and bowl each time you do the saline soak.

Relationships, body image and intimacy symptoms

Radiation therapy can affect your relationships, body image and intimacy. It may change the way you feel about sex. It is also common to have fears and worries that may affect your relationships with others. This can cause changes in your stress level and emotions.

What you can do to help:

- Talk to any member of your healthcare team about your fears and worries.
- Talk to your family and friends about your fears and worries.
- Ask any member of your healthcare team about community programs that can help support you such as Hearth Place, Canadian Cancer Society, and the Look Good Feel Better Program.
- Keep a daily journal throughout your treatment.

For more information read the “Intimacy and Sex For People With Cancer and Their Partners” booklet found at cancercareontario.ca/sites/ccocancercare/files/IntimacyandSex.pdf

Preparing for your treatment

Go to the main reception on B1 level for your first appointment. The clerk will show you how to check in at the computer for you're the rest of your appointments. Your first day on the treatment unit may take extra time. The radiation therapists check the treatment plan made for you. X-ray images are taken. These images are used to check that your treatment matches your treatment plan. This process is repeated throughout your treatment.

After your treatments are finished

Side effects from radiation treatment continue for about 4 to 6 weeks after your treatments are finished. Some of the side effects may get worse before they get better. At your last treatment appointment, the radiation therapists review any care you need to continue during this time. Make sure you have a follow up appointment booked with your radiation oncologist.

If you have a problem or concern about a symptom or side effect from your cancer treatment:

1. Call your primary nurse at the cancer centre from Monday to Friday, 8:30 am to 4 pm, (except on holidays). Use the phone number your primary nurse gave you.
2. Contact CareChart Digital Health from Monday to Friday, 5 pm to 8:30 am and anytime on weekends and holidays for symptom management support.

Talk to a nurse using one of these options:

- Call the after-hours telephone line at 1-877-681-3057.
- Request a video call by going to carechart.ca.
- Use the CareChart Digital Health App. This App is available to download for iOS or Android devices.

Call 911 or go to the Emergency Department at the hospital closest to you for a medical emergency. Talk to a member of your healthcare team if you have questions or do not understand any information in this handout.

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