



Breast Radiation Therapy Treatment Information Booklet

Radiation Oncology

For all enquiries phone: (08) 6383 3000



In this Booklet

Possible reactions

Common side-effects

Arm and shoulder movement

Emotional wellbeing

Pregnancy

Chemotherapy

Follow up

Further support and health information

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 up to 5 days a week over several weeks. It is painless and although the appointment time may be for 10 to 20 minutes in duration, the treatment itself only takes a few minutes.

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 as they are specific to the area receiving treatment.

This booklet discusses common side effects and suggests ways to minimise them. If required, your radiation oncologist/doctor can prescribe medications to soothe reactions that may take place.



Possible reactions

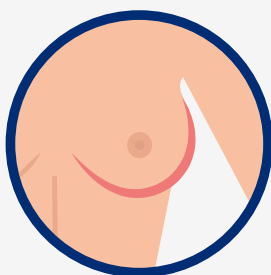
When radiation therapy is delivered, the treatment has to pass through normal structures to reach the treatment area. As a result, reactions in normal tissues within the treatment area can be expected to occur to some degree. Individual patients will have different degrees of reaction depending on the site to be treated, the dose given, the number of treatments and overall health factors. Reactions may also be influenced to a greater extent by other forms of treatment given, e.g. reactions are likely to be greater if chemotherapy is given at the same time as radiotherapy.

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

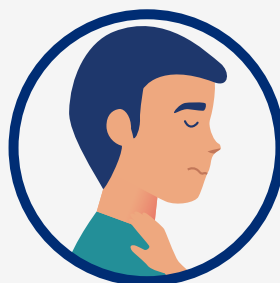
You will have regular reviews during your treatment and these appointment dates and times will be included in your treatment schedule. In between the review appointments you are encouraged to mention any treatment related issues that you have with the radiation therapists or nursing staff, who will be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

Common side-effects include:

1. Breast reactions



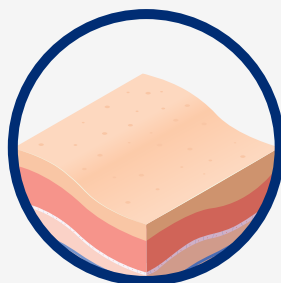
2. Throat/oesophagus reactions



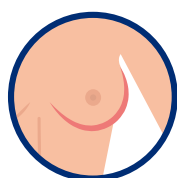
3. Lymphoedema



4. Skin reactions



5. Fatigue



1. 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 the 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.



2. Throat/oesophagus reactions

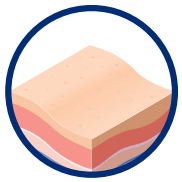
If the prescribed treatment includes the lymph nodes in the neck, inflammation within the throat/oesophagus can occur resulting in a sore throat, the sensation of a lump in the throat or heartburn. Please inform the radiation therapists, nursing staff or your doctor if this occurs so medication can be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



3. 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 and less commonly, it can occur some years after the treatment. Lymphoedema is more common in those patients that have had lymph nodes removed, and 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 contribute to 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 air after treatment.



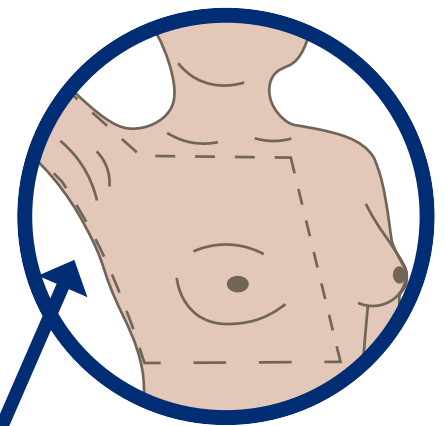
4. Skin reactions

Some degree of reddening (erythema) usually develops in the treated area approximately 10 to 14 days after the first treatment. Reactions are generally mild and present like sunburn, which can be relieved by 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 that are particularly likely to be affected are the sensitive skin in the fold beneath the breast, the nipple and in some cases, the skin in the armpit.

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 an unscented deodorant, some suggestions are: 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 commence treatment start moisturising with Sorbolene cream (or similar) provided. Apply the cream twice a day to the entire treatment area and gently massage into the skin until it is absorbed. Apply the cream more than two hours before your treatment and place in it the fridge for greater soothing. If you have not been given this cream, please ask the radiation therapists or nursing staff. Alternative soothing creams will be provided if the area becomes itchy or sore.
- ▶ If you wish to try another method of skin protection please discuss with your doctor or a nurse.
- ▶ Wear loose fitting clothes. Tight clothing can irritate the affected areas; this includes tight fitting or underwired bras. If the skin around the treated breast area becomes uncomfortable, wear a loose cotton bra without underwire or a crop top instead.



This is where you put the cream. Please clarify with a radiation therapist or nurse if you are unsure.

- ▶ 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 the skin reaction. 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 doctor if you experience itching, irritation, pustules or blistering so that extra care and advice can be given.

Skin care after radiation therapy

Changes can be at their worst approximately 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. It is advised to 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. Shading from direct sunlight by clothing is recommended for a period of 18 months to 2 years after treatment. A maximum sun block lotion (at least SPF30) is recommended after this time and care to avoid burning should always be exercised.



5. 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, make sure you 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 are evidenced to benefit patients with fatigue. Please ask the staff for further information.

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



Arm and shoulder movement

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

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. In some cases physiotherapy may be necessary and this can be arranged if needed.

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 these circumstances.

You can try spending time with those people that 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.

Pregnancy

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

Chemotherapy

Chemotherapy can be recommended in addition to surgery and radiation therapy for breast cancer patients. Specific reactions can occur in relation to the use of chemotherapy and as these will vary for each individual, your doctor will discuss this in detail with you. .

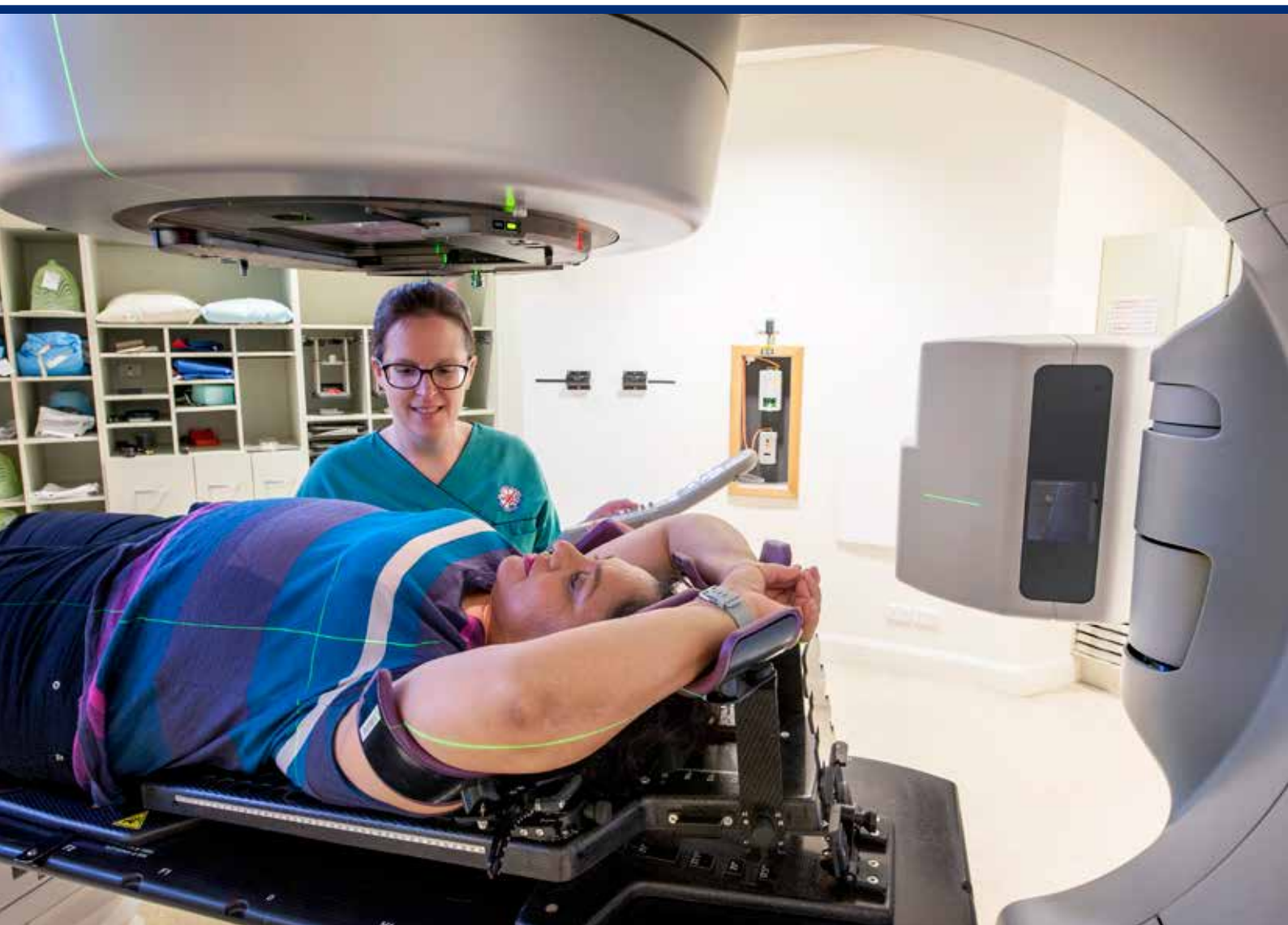
If there is any change to your chemotherapy schedule it is important that you make the staff in Radiation Oncology aware of this immediately.

Follow up

When radiation therapy is completed your doctor will organise a follow-up appointment. If you experience any problems related to your treatment after completion and before your follow-up appointment, please contact the department by phoning (08) 6383 3000, Monday to Friday from 8:00am to 4:00pm.

This booklet discusses common problems or reactions that may occur when having radiation therapy to the breast. Not all the 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 booklet, please feel free to ask any of the radiation therapists, nurses, your radiation oncologist or registrar.



Further support and health information:

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 makeup 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

Telephone: 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.

The Cancer Council

Telephone: 131120

Website: www.cancerwa.asn.au/patients

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

Health Direct

Telephone: 1800 022 222

Website: www.healthdirect.gov.au

General guidance for patients: symptoms, diagnosis, treatment options and available services. 24-hour health advice.

Solaris Cancer Care

Telephone: 08 6383 3475

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

SCGH DD block, Ground floor Hospital Avenue, Nedlands
Solaris Cancer Care provides up-to-date, practical, evidence informed 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

Telephone: 1800 624 973

Website: www.canceraustralia.gov.au

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

The website has a section on breast cancer and lymphoedema. <https://canceraustralia.gov.au/publications-and-resources/cancer-australia-publications/understanding-lymphoedema>

Breast Cancer Clinical Psychology Service

Telephone: 08 9224 2723

The Breast Cancer Clinical Psychology Service was established to help breast cancer patients better manage the emotional pressures and provide specialist clinical psychology input. Access the service by asking a member of your treating team to provide a referral for you.

Breast Cancer Care WA

Telephone: 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

Telephone: 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.

BCNA Emotional Wellbeing: www.bcna.org.au/health-wellbeing/emotional-wellbeing

YWCA Encore

Telephone: 1800 305 150

Website: www.ywcaencore.org.au

The YWCA Encore is a free eight week exercise program specifically designed for both men and women recovering from breast cancer. The program is designed to restore strength, mobility and flexibility as well as develop confidence and general wellbeing.

Australasian Lymphology Association

Telephone: 1300 935 332

Website: www.lymphoedema.org.au

References

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6. <https://www.eviq.org.au/patients-and-carers/radiotherapy-patient-information-sheets/3101-skin-changes-and-skin-care-during-radiotherap>