



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



Chest treatment Radiation Oncology

Patient information



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Introduction

Radiation therapy is often given to patients with cancers that arise in the chest region. This may be given in conjunction with other types of treatment, such as surgery or chemotherapy.

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 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 suggests ways to minimise them. If required, your radiation oncologist will prescribe medications to soothe reactions that may occur.

As the treatment is in the chest region, if you have a pacemaker or implantable cardioverter-defibrillator (ICD), it is important that you tell the radiation therapist or nursing staff.

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.

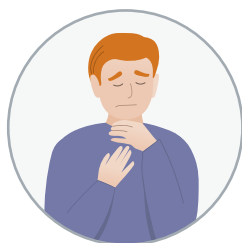
Usually, reactions would not be expected until the second or third week of treatment. They are likely to persist throughout the treatment and subside a couple of weeks after treatment is completed.

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:



Loss of appetite
and difficulty
maintaining weight



Difficulty
swallowing



Shortness of breath
and/or cough



Skin reactions



Fatigue



Loss of appetite and difficulty maintaining weight

Loss of appetite is a common side effect of cancer and its treatment. You may eat less because you do not feel hungry, food may taste different, or you may feel nauseous. It is very important to maintain an adequate intake of food to help minimise weight loss.

Some suggestions to maintain an adequate intake of food

- Avoid skipping meals; an empty stomach can make you feel worse.
- Eat small, frequent meals and snacks throughout the day; try eating every two to three hours.
- Choose foods and drinks that are high in energy and protein (ask your nurse or dietitian for a list of suggestions).
- Clean your teeth, or rinse your mouth, before and after eating.
- Gentle exercise can stimulate your appetite.
- Modify the texture of your diet as required.

Keeping your weight stable and your energy levels up is important for your health and your treatment. Significant weight loss can delay your treatment as the treatment plan is specific to your shape and size. The nurses will see you throughout your treatment and ask questions about dietary intake and side effects that you may be experiencing.



Difficulty swallowing

This can happen because of the cancer or the treatment. Problems can start a few weeks after treatment has started and may last for some time after the radiotherapy has been completed.

The reaction may be worse if chemotherapy is given at the same time as radiation therapy. If you experience this reaction, please let your radiation therapist, nurse or doctor know so that pain-relieving medication can be recommended or prescribed.

Dietary modifications can be recommended to ensure an adequate intake of food is maintained. Changing the texture of your food to soft, minced or pureed can help.



Shortness of breath and/or cough

Patients undergoing radiation therapy for lung cancer often complain of shortness of breath. This can be caused by a number of problems, including the cancer, smoking history, and asthma.

Shortness of breath can also be caused by radiation therapy, but this is likely to occur two to three months after the completion of treatment. This lung reaction is known as radiation pneumonitis and can last for some months. It is essential that this reaction is diagnosed correctly so it can be treated. This is one of the reasons why it is essential to attend your follow-up appointment.

It is common to have a persistent and irritating cough in association with a lung tumour as the linings of the airways are irritated. Complications of the cancer may also include an infection of the lungs.

Please keep your home and social environment free of smoke and other lung irritants and let your radiation therapist, nurse or doctor know if the cough is causing problems, as a cough suppressant can be prescribed.

If you are prescribed medications for a cough or shortness of breath, please use them as the doctor has directed. If you have been prescribed medicine for inhalation or nebulisation and you are unsure how to use it correctly, please ask the nursing staff for advice.



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. There may be some mild darkening in pigmentation of the skin. Your radiation therapist can indicate where the reactions are likely to occur.

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.
- Gently pat the skin dry using a soft towel – do not rub.
- Start moisturising with Sorbolene (or similar) cream provided as soon as treatment begins. Apply the cream twice a day to the entire treatment area and gently massage into the skin until absorbed. 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.
- Wear loose-fitting clothes. Tight clothing can irritate the affected areas.
- Avoid exposure of the affected area to direct sunlight.
- When swimming outdoors, always cover the treatment area with a cotton T-shirt or rashie. 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. Swimming in chlorinated pools may worsen the skin reaction. If this happens, please ask the radiation therapist or nurse whether it is advisable to continue swimming.

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

Your skin will be more susceptible to sun damage after radiotherapy. Clothing that protects the skin against direct sunlight is recommended for 18 months to two years after treatment. A maximum sun block 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.



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.



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.

Try spending time with 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.

Tell the radiation therapists or nursing team if you feel you are having difficulty coping with your diagnosis, treatment, domestic and travel arrangements or finances. They will organise for you to see trained professionals as needed.

Completion of treatment

Allow yourself time to recover once treatment is completed. Each patient responds differently to their treatment and recovery times may vary. It is best not to compare your progress with that of others.

If you are experiencing any side effects from the treatment, these may continue for the next few weeks and may even get worse before they begin to get better. Side effects should gradually subside within 1 month.

Tiredness and fatigue due to radiotherapy may affect you for some time. Here are some tips on how to manage this:

- Continue exercise such as walking, bowling, golf or swimming
- Consider scheduling your activities for the day according to your energy levels
- Ensure you have a healthy balanced diet
- Ensure you are adequately hydrated
- Accept help from friends or family and ask for help if you need it.

Follow-up appointment

When radiation therapy is completed your radiation oncologist 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 Radiation Oncology on (08) 6383 3000, Monday to Friday from 8am to 4pm.

Outside these hours you can see your GP or, if the matter is urgent, go to the Emergency Department.



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.

The website has a section on breast cancer and lymphoedema: <https://www.canceraustralia.gov.au/publications-and-resources/cancer-australia-publications/lymphoedema-what-you-need-know>



References

1. www.eviq.org.au/radiation-oncology/respiratory
2. <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.

