

## Patient information factsheet

# Radiotherapy to the breast and chest wall

**Your doctor has prescribed a course of radiotherapy for your breast or, if you have had a mastectomy, your chest wall.**

Radiotherapy involves the use of high-energy radiation and is commonly used to treat cancer - almost half of people with cancer have radiotherapy as part of their treatment plan.

This factsheet explains what to expect at your radiotherapy treatment appointments. It aims to answer some of the initial questions you are likely to have but if you would like more information or have any concerns, please speak to a radiographer who will be pleased to advise you.

### Your computerised tomography (CT) scan

Before having radiotherapy you will need to come for a CT scan session so that we can plan your treatment. We will scan your breast and chest to make sure we have all the information required to ensure the treatment is as accurate as possible. At the scan session we will use a special skin marker pen to draw a few small marks in discreet areas to show where you need treatment.

We may also need to treat the groups of glands under your arm and in the lower part of your neck. It's important to remember that the special skin care advice over the page applies to all areas being treated (including your shoulder and upper back).

### Your radiotherapy treatment

When you get to the radiotherapy department, check in using your barcode letter and take a seat in the waiting area. A radiographer will give you a hospital gown to change into before you go into the treatment room.

Once you enter the treatment room the radiographer will ask you to confirm your **name, date of birth** and **address**. This will happen each time you attend for treatment.

The team of radiographers may then take a little time to position you carefully. The radiotherapy is quick and painless and usually takes about fifteen minutes. You will be asked to keep still and to breathe normally. During the treatment itself, you will be on your own in the room. The radiographers will be just outside and will watch you on a discreet closed circuit television all the time.

### Your appointment schedule

You will be given a list of your upcoming appointments on your first day of treatment, but please be aware that they are **subject to change**. We will let you know if we need to change one of your appointments. When your treatment is complete, ask the radiographer if you are needed for any other appointments within the department. If not, you are free to leave and continue your day.

## Side effects

During your course of radiotherapy the area of your skin that is being treated may become sore, sensitive or discoloured. These side effects vary from person to person. Some people find their skin starts to go darker or turn pink towards the end of the course, while others find it becomes dry, itchy and slightly broken.

To help look after your skin:

- avoid using perfumed products in the treatment area
- wash gently using lukewarm water and avoiding vigorous rubbing
- avoid tight fitting garments that can rub or chafe the skin
- wear soft comfortable bras
- avoid swimming as chlorinated water can dry your skin out further
- take sensible precautions in the sun and keep the treatment area covered
- if you shave under your arms, shave before treatment starts and then leave the area until after the end of your course

## After radiotherapy

It's normal for the side effects of radiotherapy to persist and even get worse for a few weeks after treatment. Keep following the skin care advice above until your skin returns to normal. After that you will be able to go back to activities like swimming. After your radiotherapy treatment you will need to apply high factor sun cream to the area that's been treated.

After a month you should find that you start to have more energy.

If you notice any changes or side effects during your treatment, please discuss them with the radiographers. They will be able to offer advice or reassurance and suggest ways to help you cope.

## Frequently asked questions

- **Will I be radioactive?** You will not be radioactive; it's perfectly safe for you to be around family and friends.
- **Can I swim?** While we would normally encourage physical exercise, swimming in chlorinated water can dry your skin out further and could cause a worse skin reaction.
- **After treatment, can I continue with my normal activities?** Yes you can, within reason. If you start to feel really tired or unwell you may have to make adjustments.
- **Do I feel anything as the treatment is happening?** No, you don't feel a thing. It is quick and painless.
- **Can I miss treatments?** We would advise that you do not miss a treatment once you have started. You might find that there are gaps in your appointment schedule, which may be due to machine services or public holidays. We work hard to minimise these gaps and you may on occasion be asked to attend on a weekend or public holiday.

## Useful information

### Parking

Car park 8 is situated outside the oncology centre. This can be found by following directions for the eye unit. Parking spaces are limited, so please allow plenty of time to park.

If you are having radiotherapy treatment you are entitled to a discount on parking. You must remember to validate your ticket at the radiotherapy reception before paying at the parking machine.

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## Macmillan Cancer Information and Support Centre

The centre is located on B level in the East Wing courtyard. Opening hours are Monday to Friday from 10am to 4pm. Drop-in sessions are available or you can book an appointment on telephone: **023 8120 6037**.

## Free prescriptions

Patients having treatment for cancer are entitled to free prescriptions. If you're not already claiming for these, please ask a member of staff for an exemption certificate.

## Who to contact if you have concerns

If you have urgent symptoms relating to your current radiotherapy treatment, please call the acute oncology service at Southampton General Hospital on **07867 973649**. This number is answered 24-hours, seven days a week, but is only for treatment-related symptoms and not for general queries such as rearranging appointments or hospital transport, for example.

If your symptoms are not urgent, you can speak to one of the radiographers when you attend for your radiotherapy treatment.

In an emergency call **999**.

## Useful links

Cancer Research UK – About breast cancer radiotherapy:

**[www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/type/breast-cancer/treatment/radiotherapy/about-breast-cancer-radiotherapy](http://www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/type/breast-cancer/treatment/radiotherapy/about-breast-cancer-radiotherapy)**

NHS Choices – Cancer of the breast:

**[www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Cancer-of-the-breast-female/Pages/Introduction.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Cancer-of-the-breast-female/Pages/Introduction.aspx)**

NHS Choices – Radiotherapy: side effects:

**[www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Radiotherapy/Pages/Side-effects.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Radiotherapy/Pages/Side-effects.aspx)**

**If you need a translation of this document, an interpreter or a version in large print, Braille or on audiotape, please telephone **023 8120 4688** for help.**