

Patient information factsheet

Radiotherapy to the breast and chest wall

We have given you this factsheet because 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. 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.

Computerised tomography (CT) scan

Before having radiotherapy, you will need to come to the hospital 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 needed so that the radiotherapy treatment is as accurate as possible.

At the CT scan session, we will use a special skin marker pen to draw a few small marks in discreet areas. These marks will show the radiographers 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. The special skin care advice in this factsheet applies to all areas being treated, including your shoulder and upper back.

Your radiotherapy treatment

When you get to the radiotherapy department, check in at reception 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 will then position you carefully. The radiographers will then leave the room while the treatment is happening. They will monitor you on a discreet closed-circuit television.

You will be on your own in the treatment room during the treatment. We will ask you to keep still and to breathe normally during the treatment.

The radiotherapy is quick and painless and usually takes about fifteen minutes.

Side effects

During your course of radiotherapy, the area of your skin that is being treated may become:

- sore
- sensitive
- discoloured

Some people find that 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, you should:

- 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 (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

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.

After radiotherapy

After your radiotherapy treatment you will need to apply high factor sun cream to the area that has been treated. It is normal for the side effects of radiotherapy to continue or worsen for a few weeks after treatment. You should keep following the skin care advice above until your skin returns to normal. When your skin has returned to normal, you will be able to go back to activities like swimming.

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

Frequently asked questions

Will I be radioactive?

You will not be radioactive, so it is 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. This could cause a worse skin reaction.

Can I continue with my normal activities after treatment?

Yes. However, you may have to make adjustments if you start to feel tired or unwell.

Do I feel anything as the treatment is happening?

No, treatment 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 be asked to attend for treatment on a weekend or public holiday.

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Useful information

Parking

Blue car park is located outside the oncology centre. It 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.

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 are not already claiming for these, please ask a member of staff for an exemption certificate.

Contact us

If you have urgent symptoms relating to your current radiotherapy treatment, please call the **acute oncology service** at Southampton General Hospital on **023 8120 1345**.

This number is answered 24-hours, seven days a week, but is only for treatment-related symptoms. It is **not** for general queries such as rearranging appointments or hospital transport. 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**.

For any non-urgent queries, please contact the radiotherapy reception.

Radiotherapy reception

Telephone: **023 8120 8568** (Monday to Friday, 8am to 6pm)

Useful links

Cancer Research UK – About breast cancer radiotherapy:

www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/type/breast-cancer/treatment/radiotherapy/about-breast-cancer-radiotherapy

NHS Choices

www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Cancer-of-the-breast-female/Pages/Introduction.aspx

www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Radiotherapy/Pages/Side-effects.aspx

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For help preparing for your visit, arranging an interpreter or accessing the hospital, please visit www.uhs.nhs.uk/additionalsupport