

## What to Expect During Treatment: Radiation Therapy to the Breast/Chestwall

### Why is radiation therapy used to treat breast cancer?

Radiation therapy is a type of treatment that is often used to treat cancer of the breast. Radiation therapy may be used in combination with other therapies such as surgery, chemotherapy and hormone therapy. Your medical team has recommended radiation therapy as a part of your treatment. Your radiation plan is designed specifically for you by your radiation oncologist. This pamphlet will help to remind you what was discussed and should help you understand what to expect with your treatments.

### What will happen on the day I come for my markings?

The day you come to the Cancer Centre for markings is called your “simulation appointment”. During this visit, you will be x-rayed, measured and marked for your radiation treatments. It will take about 45 minutes. Your x-rays for simulation may be done by an x-ray machine or a CAT scan machine, or both. Regardless of which machine is used, the x-rays do not hurt and you do not have to hold your breath. It is very important that you do not move. The radiation therapists who will be taking care of you on this visit will make every effort to make you comfortable. They will explain every step of the way what they are doing. Information from your x-rays will be used to design and calculate your treatments.

Once all your x-rays and measurements are complete, the radiation therapists will give you small tattoo marks that will be used each day to position you for your radiation treatments. These tattoo marks, about the size of a freckle, will be permanent. You will have about 6 to 7 tattoos on your chest area. They will be used each day to position you for your radiation treatments. After your simulation appointment, you may have some marker and extra ink on your skin. It can be washed off when you get home.

Your radiation oncologist and radiation therapist will answer any questions you may have about your treatments including the side effects, how to care for your skin, and even lodging and accommodations... so come prepared to have your questions answered. Most people find it helpful to bring someone else along to hear all that the therapists and doctor have to say.



Capital Health

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## How long will it be until I start my radiation treatments?

After your simulation appointment, you will usually wait for a few weeks while the Cancer Centre staff plans and prepares your treatment. You will be notified of the start date for your radiation treatment as soon as your planning is completed and a time has been booked for the radiation treatment machine. Every reasonable effort will be made to start your treatments as soon as possible, and within the recommended waiting time.

## How long will my treatments take?

Once you have received the call to come to the centre for your treatments you should expect to have 3 to 6 weeks of radiation treatments. Your radiation oncologist will let you know exactly how many treatments you will be having. The treatments are given 5 days a week, Monday to Friday (except for holidays). You may not necessarily start your treatments on a Monday. Your appointment each day will take 15 minutes. This allows 5 to 10 minutes to get you in position and only a few minutes of actual radiation treatment time. Once a week you will see your radiation oncologist and nurse for a checkup after your treatment. Be prepared to be at the clinic for more than 15 minutes that day.

## What side effects will I have from the radiation treatments?

The first 2 weeks of treatment should be easy, with very few side effects except for a little tiredness. For most people, their side effects tend to appear toward the middle of the course of radiation and peak 1 or 2 weeks after the radiation is finished. They go away over the next 4 to 8 weeks.

During the last few weeks of treatment, most people may have:

- **Fatigue**

Side effects of radiation treatment can include fatigue. This is not usually severe. You may be more tired after a usual activity and may need a nap or rest after each treatment. You will be given an **information sheet** with suggestions to help you cope with the fatigue.

## 5. Use cornstarch on your skin:

From the start of your treatments, it is helpful to use a light dusting of cornstarch or baby powder on your breast or chest wall. Do not put cornstarch on an area that is moist.

## 6. Use pure Aloe Vera gel:

Aloe Vera gel may help with dry, itchy skin. You can buy it at most stores and it is usually clear or green in colour. The gel will help keep the skin from drying and cut down on mild itchiness. Stop using cornstarch if you are using Aloe Vera gel.

## 7. Use the medications given to you by your doctor:

Once your skin has started to become very red and itchy, and the Aloe Vera gel is no longer helping, your doctor, therapist or nurse will give you a cream to use. The cream is hydrocortisone based, and should be used only twice a day to help with the discomfort. You will be given information about using the cream. If your skin becomes moist or even peels, you should stop using the hydrocortisone cream. Your radiation oncologist may prescribe another special cream for you to use.

You will be given an **information sheet** with suggestions for skin care during the radiation.

### • Changes to Your Breast

If you have not had a full mastectomy, you may have changes to your breast that is being treated. The breast reacts by holding more fluid in the tissues and the breast may appear fuller and feel heavier. You may also have occasional, mild, unusual sensations within the breast such as a tug, twinge or pull.

## Is there a chance that I may get lymphedema from my treatments?

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Your treatment plan may include radiation treatment to the lymph node areas in your underarm (axilla). Combined with surgery to the underarm, the addition of radiation to the axilla can result in problems with the drainage of lymph fluid from the arm. This would be seen as swelling of the arm or “**lymphedema**”. Talk to your radiation oncologist to find out about the risk of developing lymphedema. If needed, you will be given an **information sheet** about lymphedema.

In general, radiation therapy to the breast or chest wall is very well tolerated. There are possible side effects as noted. If you have any questions during the course of radiation, please ask a member of your treatment team - your radiation oncologist, radiation therapist or nurse.

There may be some side effects that are permanent. Please ask to talk with your radiation oncologist if you have any questions regarding possible long-term side effects.

## What is Supportive Care?

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Cancer is a physical disease but it also affects how you think and feel. You and your family/friends might feel a range of emotions (like fear, anxiety, anger, sadness, depression, loneliness or frustration) related to your cancer diagnosis and treatment. This is understandable. Sometimes it is not possible to get all of the help and support you need from people closest to you. If you are having trouble coping with your cancer diagnosis, there are health care professionals at the Cancer Centre who can help (such as psychologist, social worker, advanced practice nurse, spiritual care counselor, psychiatrist). As well, there are Support Groups you could attend, where you could talk with, or listen to, others who are going through a similar diagnosis and treatment. If you are interested in talking with someone about your feelings and experiences, tell the medical staff so they can connect you with the appropriate person or group. Your emotional health and well-being are very important.

## Questions you may want to ask your Health Care Team

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- What type of treatment(s) should I get for my breast cancer?
- What will be the timing of my chemotherapy and radiation treatments?
- Do I have to do anything to prepare for my radiation markings or treatments?
- What should I expect to have happen during my treatments?
- How will I know the radiation treatments are working?
- Can I wash?
- How will I cope with the side effects?
- What happens when the treatments end?
- Will I have any long-term side effects from my treatments?

### • Skin Reaction

The skin may react to the radiation by becoming dry and itchy, pink or even red. Some dark skinned patients may have an increased darkening of the skin. There may be small areas of dry or sometimes wet peeling of the skin. For those women who have not had a full mastectomy, there may be areas of tenderness, especially at the upper inner part of the breast, the nipple or the crease underneath the breast.

We have listed some “Do’s and Don’ts” that will help you cope with the changes your skin may have, and even help prevent your skin reaction from worsening:

#### 1. You can wash and bathe:

It is best if you take short showers or tub baths with lukewarm water. Try not to have the stream of water hit your breast or chest wall directly. Use a gentle, non-perfume soap. After bathing, dry off your breast or chest wall with a soft towel and pat dry... do not rub or scrub with the towel.

#### 2. Do not shave under your arm:

While having your radiation treatments, and for a few weeks after, it is best not to shave under your arm on the side of your body that is being given treatment.

#### 3. You can use unscented antiperspirant:

Be careful not to use deodorant, but instead use antiperspirant. The antiperspirant must be unscented and should not be put on before your treatment each day. If your underarm becomes tender or reddened, it may be best to stop using the antiperspirant until the reaction in your underarm goes away.

#### 4. Do not put any creams or lotions on your breast or chest wall:

Most commercial creams will make the reaction worse. Your radiation oncologist will recommend or prescribe creams if needed.