

Radiation Therapy



RADIATION THERAPY

Radiation therapy (or radiotherapy) is used to destroy any breast cancer cells that may be left in your breast after breast conserving surgery, or in any breast tissue on your chest wall after a mastectomy.

WHAT IS RADIATION THERAPY?

Radiotherapy uses X-rays (controlled doses of radiation) to destroy cancer cells. It is a localized treatment, which means it treats only the area of your body it is aimed at. Radiotherapy is painless. The experience is similar to that of a regular x-ray.

WHO MANAGES RADIOTHERAPY TREATMENT?

A radiation oncologist specializes in treating cancer with radiotherapy. He or she will advise you whether radiotherapy could be useful in the management of your breast cancer, and what sort of risks may be involved.

He or she will calculate the appropriate dose and duration of your radiotherapy, and answer any questions you may have.

A radiation therapist works the radiotherapy machines, under the direction of a radiation oncologist.

HOW LONG DOES THE TREATMENT TAKE?

Usually you will start radiotherapy 3-6 weeks after surgery. The starting time depends on the availability of services, and how quickly your wounds from surgery heal. If you also have chemotherapy, you will probably have radiation therapy after chemotherapy has finished (although the order in which you have your treatment depends on your situation).

Before you start radiotherapy, you will have a planning visit at the radiotherapy centre. During this visit a radiotherapy simulator is used to plan your treatment.

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In planning for treatment, marks will be put onto your skin so the radiation therapist will know where to direct the radiotherapy. These marks are small, and can be either temporary or permanent.

Once you start treatment, you will usually have radiotherapy once a day, 5 days a week for 5 or 6 weeks. Radiotherapy treatments are given this often in order to minimize side effects. If radiation is given less often, each treatment dose needs to be larger, and the side effects can be worse.

You may need to spend up to a total of 40 minutes at the radiotherapy centre for each visit. You might have to wait for the treatment room to become available, and you will also need time to change your clothes. Although the actual treatments only take a few minutes or so, you will probably be in the treatment room for about 10 minutes.

WHAT ARE THE SIDE EFFECTS OF RADIOTHERAPY?

Radiotherapy can have some side effects. Some of these can happen during treatment, and some may develop months after treatment has finished. These side effects are listed below. Not everyone experiences these side effects, and some women have none at all.

COMMON SIDE EFFECTS:

Your skin on and around the treatment area can become red and dry, much like sunburn – this can begin as early as the second week of treatment, and usually improves a few weeks after stopping treatment.

You will probably feel more tired than usual – this usually begins a week or so after starting radiotherapy, and lasts for about 2-4 weeks after treatment has finished.

Your skin can start to look darker than usual – your skin may stay that way for a few months after treatment, but colour will fade with time.

You will probably be unable to breastfeed from the breast that has been treated with radiotherapy.

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OCCASIONAL SIDE EFFECTS:

Your breast or chest may feel tender, and you may feel occasional aches or twinges – this may continue for a year or more after treatment is finished, but the aches usually become milder and less frequent, and eventually settle with time

Your breast may become slightly swollen – this can happen during treatment or some months after treatment has finished, and usually settles with time (but it can take up to a few years)

You may find the firmness of your breast increases – this can happen during treatment or some months after treatment has finished (the firmness lessens with time, but your breast might be permanently firmer than it was before treatment).

Your treated breast may eventually be slightly smaller than the other breast

The skin on your breast may start to peel or even blister towards the middle or end of your treatment – this usually settles within weeks of finishing treatment.

You could develop lymphoedema

You might lose the hair in your armpit if you have radiotherapy to the armpit

You could develop a sore throat if you have radiotherapy to the lower neck – talk to your doctor if this happens.

RARE SIDE EFFECTS:

Inflammation of your lung, called pneumonitis – symptoms include a dry cough, a mild fever, shortness of breath and tiredness, and can develop up to 6 months after radiotherapy (treatment is available, and usually lasts for less than a month).

Pain in your ribs

Ribs at risk of fracturing, due to the radiotherapy weakening your bones.

Remember these side effects are rare. The benefits of radiotherapy are usually considered to outweigh the risks of these rare side effects.