

Information for patients and carers

After Radiotherapy to the Breast or Chest wall



This booklet contains information for patients that have completed a course of radiotherapy to the breast or chest wall. The information is a guide to help manage side effects from the treatment.

Side effects often continue to develop after treatment has finished, this is normal. Many patients notice that side effects get slightly worse and peak 2 - 3 weeks after treatment before gradually improving.

Side effects can vary from one person to another, and some patients may not experience any side effects from their treatment.

Skin Care Advice

Please continue to follow the skin care advice you were given during your radiotherapy. The main things to remember are:

- Keep using your moisturiser until any skin reaction has fully settled. This can take a few weeks.
- Reduce rubbing or friction from clothing over the treated area.
- Wear loose-fitting clothes made from natural fibres (such as cotton), both during the day and at night.
- When washing the area, avoid very hot or very cold water.
 - Use a soft cotton towel and gently pat the skin dry - do not rub.
- Try to avoid direct sunlight on the treated area.
 - The skin is more sensitive to the sun, especially during the first 12 months after treatment.
 - Use a high factor sunscreen (SPF 50+) if the area is exposed.

- It may be best to avoid swimming for a few weeks after treatment, until your skin has healed and any reaction has settled.

Skin Changes After Radiotherapy

Skin reactions are common when you have radiotherapy to the breast or chest wall. During treatment, or up to 2 - 3 weeks after finishing, the skin may:

- Become sore or tender
- Change colour (pink, red, or darker)
- Feel dry or itchy

You may notice a spotty, itchy rash or small blisters anywhere in the treated area. If this happens, keep using your moisturiser regularly, as this helps soothe the skin.

To help with itching, you can:

- Apply a **pea sized amount of 1% hydrocortisone cream** twice a day
- Put this on before your moisturiser.
- Use it on unbroken, intact skin only.
- This cream can be bought from a pharmacy without a prescription.
- Over the counter antihistamine tablets may also help reduce itching

What should I do if my skin breaks down?

Sometimes the skin in the radiotherapy area can split or break down. This may cause weeping or oozing as the top layer of skin peels away.

If this happens:

- Stop using moisturisers or creams on the broken area
- Avoid soap, shower gel, or scented products
- Keep the area clean and dry

How to gently clean the skin:

- Wash very gently using cooled boiled water or salt water
- To make salt water:
 - Dissolve one teaspoon of salt in a bowl of boiling water
 - Allow it to cool before use
- Use a soft cloth or gauze to gently bathe the area — do not rub

You can take pain relief if needed.

If you are worried, or if the skin is very painful, weepy, or not improving, please contact the **Radiotherapy Review Team** for further advice:

Swelling & Discomfort

It is common to have some discomfort in the treated area after radiotherapy. You may notice:

- A heavy or full feeling in the breast
- Occasional sharp twinges that last a few seconds

These sensations are often caused by healing nerves and temporary inflammation from the treatment. Your breast or chest area may also feel tender or slightly swollen.

This usually improves within a few weeks after treatment, although mild symptoms can sometimes last several months. Please take pain relief if needed.

Tiredness (fatigue)

Many people feel more tired than usual for several weeks after finishing radiotherapy. This is a normal part of your body's recovery.

- Rest when you need to
- Try to stay gently active, such as short walks, and build up at your own pace.
- Eat a balanced, nutritious diet.
- Keep hydrated.

Cough or Breathlessness

You may notice a new dry cough or become slightly short of breath during or following radiotherapy treatment. This can happen due to mild inflammation of the lung near the treatment area. Radiotherapy is carefully planned to keep the amount of lung treated as low as possible. These symptoms are often temporary and should improve after treatment ends.

If symptoms become more severe or worrying, please see your GP, as they may be unrelated to the radiotherapy.

Shoulder discomfort

You may notice discomfort or stiffness in your shoulder, especially if you have:

- Had a mastectomy.
- Had treatment to the lymph nodes in the armpit or collarbone.

The treatment position can sometimes aggravate the shoulder. It is important to continue the arm exercises given to you to keep your shoulder moving.

This discomfort usually settles within a few weeks of finishing treatment.

Lymphoedema

Lymph nodes are found in the armpit and just above the collarbone. If these have been treated with surgery or radiotherapy, you may develop lymphoedema, which is swelling in the arm on the treated side.

Lymphoedema may develop months or even years after treatment.

Your breast care nurse can support you if you have any concerns.

Sore throat

If the lymph nodes above your collarbone have been treated, you may have a sore throat. This is usually temporary and should improve within a few weeks. Taking a simple painkiller, such as paracetamol, before meals may help ease any discomfort.

Emotions

Ending radiotherapy can leave you with mixed emotions. Recovery is personal and may take time.

For support, contact your specialist nurse, GP, or Macmillan team.

Endocrine Therapy

If you have any ongoing concerns or require support in relation to your endocrine therapy, please contact your breast care nursing team.

Useful information can be found on this website:

<https://menopauseandcancer.org/>

Returning to work

You can return to work as soon as you feel well enough. This timescale may vary depending on the demands of your job.

Follow-up

You will receive a follow up appointment approximately 6 - 8 weeks after your radiotherapy to check your recovery. This will be in person or via telephone with a member of the radiotherapy oncology team.

Contact details

If you are worried about side effects or need further advice, please contact the Radiotherapy Review Team:

All our patient information leaflets are available on our website for patients to access and download:

www.lancsteachinghospitals.nhs.uk/patient-information-leaflets

Please ask if you would like help in understanding this information. This information can be made available in large print and in other languages.

Lancashire Teaching Hospitals is a smoke-free site. Smoking is not permitted anywhere on any of our premises, either inside or outside the buildings. Our staff will ask you about your smoking status when you come to hospital and will offer you support and advice about stopping smoking this will include Nicotine Replacement Therapy to help manage your symptoms of withdrawal and the opportunity to speak to a nurse or advisor from the specialist Tobacco and Alcohol Care Team.

If you want to stop smoking, you can also contact Smokefree Lancashire on Freephone 08081962638

Our patient information group review our new leaflets regularly. If you feel you would like to feedback on this information or join our reading group, please contact on email address:

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