



Information for
patients and
carers

**After Radiotherapy to the
Breast and 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 general guide to help manage side effects from the treatment. Side effects can vary from one person to another and some patients may not experience any side effects from their treatment. It is normal for the effects from radiotherapy to continue for a few weeks after your treatment has been completed. These effects may get slightly worse during this period, followed by gradual improvement.

Skin reactions

Skin reactions are the most common side effect when having your breast or chest wall area treated. The severity of reaction varies between patients. Radiotherapy can cause the skin to become red, dry and itchy. You should continue to apply the moisturiser or cream you have been using during treatment until the reaction has settled. Sometimes the skin can blister or break which can be painful. This is more common if you have had a mastectomy (removal of the whole breast) although it can sometimes happen underneath your breast. If this happens, we recommend you do not use moisturising cream on the broken skin and seek advice from your breast care nurse.

Skin care advice

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

- Try to wear loose fitting, cotton clothes both during the day and at night to minimise the skin reaction. Friction or rubbing of the skin can make the skin reaction worse. Try to avoid wearing underwired bras. You may be more comfortable leaving your bra off at home.
- Avoid very hot or very cold water when washing the area. Use a soft cotton towel and pat the area dry to avoid irritation.
- Avoid perfumed products in the treatment area for a couple of weeks after treatment has finished.

- Avoid exposing the treatment area to the sun during radiotherapy and until any skin reaction has settled down. A high factor sun cream is advised in the treatment area following radiotherapy, as the skin will always be more sensitive to the sun.
- Chlorine in water may irritate the skin. It may be advisable to avoid swimming for a few weeks after treatment, until the skin reaction settles down.

Breast swelling/ pain

Discomfort in the breast is common after radiotherapy. You may experience a heavy sensation in your breast or sharp twinges which typically last a few seconds. These are often caused by your nerves healing and inflammation from the radiotherapy. Your breast or chest area may become tender or swollen; this should settle a few weeks after treatment. This is usually mild but can continue for several months.

Tiredness/ fatigue

It is quite common for patients to feel tired towards the end of radiotherapy and for several weeks afterwards. This is because the body is recovering after treatment. It is important to rest when you need to but also to do some regular gentle exercise, taking it at your own pace. Eat a balanced, nutritious diet and drink plenty of water or juice. This will help your body to repair and prevent fatigue.

Shoulder discomfort

Shoulder discomfort is more common in patients who have had their breast removed or had treatment to the lymph nodes in the armpit or collarbone areas. However, sometimes the treatment position of the radiotherapy can aggravate your shoulder giving you mild pain. It is important to continue with the exercises given to you by your breast care nurse or physiotherapist to ensure you maintain movement in your shoulder. Any discomfort should settle down within a few weeks of

completing treatment. If the discomfort continues you should seek advice from your breast care nurse.

Lymphoedema

Lymph nodes are found in the armpit (axilla) and above the collarbone (SCF or supraclavicular fossa) areas. Patients who have had their lymph nodes treated by radiotherapy or surgery may experience lymphoedema or swelling of the arm on the side that has been treated. Lymphoedema is more common if you have had lymph nodes removed. It can occur several months or even years after treatment and referral to a specialist lymphedema team may help. Your breast care nurse will be able to provide more advice.

Cough or breathlessness

Radiotherapy can cause some inflammation of the lungs which may make you a little breathless. The treatment is carefully planned to minimise the amount of treatment to the lung. Some patients experience a dry cough or slight breathlessness. These symptoms are often temporary and will improve following your treatment. If you have more severe symptoms please see your GP as it may be unrelated to the radiotherapy.

Sore throat

If you have had the lymph nodes above the collarbone treated you may experience a sore throat. If you do it will settle within a few weeks. You may find it helpful to take a simple pain killer such as paracetamol before eating.

Follow up

You will receive a follow up appointment for 6 weeks after your radiotherapy has completed. This will be with a member of the oncology review team. You may see your oncologist, specialist nurse or radiographer. Generally you will receive routine mammograms once a year for the next 5 years. Following this, you will then enter into the routine breast screening service programme. Entry onto the programme is often automatic but can be dependent on your age. If you are not automatically eligible, your GP will be able to arrange entry onto the programme.

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.

Late effects from radiotherapy

Most people who have had breast radiotherapy do not experience any long term side effects at all. However, it is important that you are aware that these can happen. They will have been discussed with you when you consented for treatment.

Radiotherapy can change the cells lining the lungs causing them to thicken or harden (fibrosis). This may cause mild breathlessness for months or even years after radiotherapy. These symptoms can be worse if you smoke or have asthma. However, it is advisable to see your GP if you develop any new chest symptoms as they may be unrelated to the radiotherapy.

Slight skin discoloration is common in the months following radiotherapy and will not cause any problems. Less commonly you may notice tiny blood vessels under your skin. This is known as telangiectasia. It is a permanent side effect but will not cause you any problems but may affect cosmetic appearance.

Other long term side effects can include rib pain or rib fracture and damage to the heart (only after radiotherapy treatment of left sided breast cancers). There is also a small risk of developing another cancer in the treatment area.

Self-Care

It is important to continue to regularly check your breasts and armpits for new lumps and to look for changes to your nipple. Make an appointment to see your GP if you have any concerns or contact your breast care nurse for advice. You should also see your GP if you develop shortness of breath, a cough or new pain in your bones.

End of treatment summary

The end of treatment summary will have been given to you after your final treatment. A copy of this is also sent to your GP. It will contain personalised information relating to your specific treatment. If you have experienced a treatment reaction the summary will provide specific advice to help you look after yourself at home. Any medications you have been prescribed during your treatment will be listed which will allow you to get further prescriptions from your GP if necessary.

The summary will contain specific information relating to the area you had treated, the dose of radiotherapy and the number of treatments you have received. The information relating to side effects and medications will help your GP to understand the type of reaction you have experienced and help them to continue your care. You may want to show the summary to other health care professionals who are involved in your care.

Contact details

Should you require further advice or information please contact:

Radiotherapy Reception/Transport queries (01772) 522900

Radiotherapy Appointment queries (01772) 522931

Sources of further information

www.lancsteachinghospitals.nhs.uk

www.nhs.uk

www.patient.co.uk

www.accessable.co.uk

www.macmillan.org.uk

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

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

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If you want to stop smoking you can also contact the Quit Squad Freephone 0800 328 6297.

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

Gujarati:

આ માહિતીને સમજવામાં સહાયતા જોઈતી હોય તો કૃપા કરીને પૂછો. આ માહિતી મોટા છપાણામાં અને અન્ય ભાષામાં ઉપલબ્ધ કરી શકાય છે.

Romanian:

Vă rugăm să întrebați dacă aveți nevoie de ajutor pentru înțelegerea acestor informații. Aceste informații pot fi puse la dispoziție în format mare și în alte limbi.”

Polish:

Poinformuj nas, jeśli potrzebna jest ci pomoc w zrozumieniu tych informacji. Informacje te można również udostępnić dużym drukiem oraz w innych językach

Punjabi:

ਜੇ ਤੁਸੀਂ ਇਹ ਜਾਣਕਾਰੀ ਸਮਝਣ ਵੱਲੋਂ ਮਦਦ ਲੈਣੀ ਚਾਹੋਗੇ ਤਾਂ ਕਰਿਪਾ ਕਰਕੇ ਇਸ ਬਾਰੇ ਪੁੱਛੋ। ਇਹ ਜਾਣਕਾਰੀ ਵੱਡੇ ਪ੍ਰਿੰਟ ਅਤੇ ਹੋਰਨਾਂ ਭਾਸ਼ਾਵਾਂ ਵੱਲੋਂ ਮੁਹੱਈਆ ਕੀਤੀ ਜਾ ਸਕਦੀ ਹੈ।

Urdu:

دو سر ی زبانوں او ر بڑی اگر آپ کو ہی معلومات سمجھنے کے لیے مدد کی ضرورت ہے تو یی چھپا یں ییہ ابی دست ہو یسکت ہے برا ئے مہر یان پو ے یچھہ ی۔ معلومات

Arabic:

مطبوعة بأحرف كبيرة و بلغات إذا كنت تريد مساعدة في فهم هذه المعلومات يُرجى أن تطلب أخرى يمكن تو فسير هذه المعلومات

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