Radiation Therapy to the Breast

The Ottawa Hospital Cancer Centre
Disclaimer

This is general information developed by The Ottawa Hospital Cancer Centre. It is not intended to replace the advice of a qualified health-care provider. Please consult your health-care provider who will be able to determine the appropriateness of the information for your specific situation.
Your doctor has prescribed radiation therapy to your breast. You will be having radiation treatments five days a week. Radiation therapists will be administering your daily treatments. You may also see the radiation oncology nurse during your treatment and your radiation oncologist will see you weekly.

If you have concerns or questions, please discuss them with your radiation therapy team. They are here to help you in the following weeks.

**Smoking**

Patients are encouraged to stop smoking or at least not to smoke during treatment. Smoking increases side effects and decreases the effectiveness of your treatment. If you are having difficulties stopping smoking please talk to your health care team.

Please note that the following is a list of acute, or short-term, temporary reactions to your radiation treatment. Please discuss possible long-term effects of your treatment with your radiation oncologist.

### Possible Side-Effects

#### Skin Reactions

You may develop a skin reaction in the area being treated with radiation. This may occur after the first 2-3 weeks of treatment. You may experience discomfort, itchiness, tenderness, swelling, and reddening. Your radiation therapy team will explain which areas on your skin may be affected. The treatment area may include areas on your back. The severity of the reaction is dependent upon your skin type (sensitivity to radiation), the area being treated and the dose and number of treatments prescribed. Use the following guidelines to minimize any skin reaction you may experience.
Management
(Applies to treatment area only)
The guidelines below are to be used beginning on the first day of your radiation treatment and are to be continued for a minimum of two weeks after finishing all of your radiation treatments or until your skin has healed completely. Further skin care instructions will be provided on your last day of treatment.

Washing Instructions
• Wash treated area gently once a day. Use only mild soap containing:
  – Moisturizing agents
  – No scents or perfumes
• Use only lukewarm water when bathing or showering. Avoid long hot soaks in the tub.
• If possible, the shower setting should be adjusted to low pressure.
• Do not use a wash cloth. Instead, use your bare hand to gently wash the treated area.
• Do not scrub the skin in the treatment area.
• Do not remove any non-permanent skin markings.
• Air dry or gently pat skin with a soft cotton towel after bathing. Avoid rubbing skin in the area being treated.

Other General Guidelines
• **Hydration**: You are advised to apply a moisturizing lotion or cream to the treatment area after bathing and as often as possible throughout the day to moisturize the skin. Start before treatment if possible. The lotion or cream should contain:
  – **No** scents or perfumes
  – **No** Lanolin
Discontinue the use of the lotion or cream and inform your radiation therapy team if the skin starts to become itchy, dry or begins to break down or open.
• **Antiperspirant / deodorant:** You may use underarm antiperspirant or deodorant during the course of your treatment. Discontinue the use of such products and inform your health care team should you develop a skin reaction under your arm. Deodorants and antiperspirants should be fragrance-free if possible.

• **Shaving:** Only shave the underarm being treated when absolutely necessary. Only use an electric shaver. Do not shave more than every third day. Discontinue shaving if a skin reaction occurs. Do not use waxes and other hair removal products in the treatment area until treatment is complete and the skin has fully healed.

• **Irritants:** Avoid any irritants such as perfumes, body sprays, etc.

• **Scratching:** Do not scratch itchy skin within the treatment area.

• **Temperatures:** Avoid exposing irradiated skin to temperature extremes (ice packs, heating pads, hot/cold/wet compresses, hot waxing, saunas and hot tubs, etc.).

• **Bandages:** Avoid Band Aid® type bandages and adhesive tapes on treated skin.

• **Clothing:** Wear soft, breathable, loose fitting clothing and avoid tight fitting or compression garments in the treated area. Avoid wearing an underwire bra.

• **Sun and wind exposure:** Protect treated area from direct sunlight and wind exposure. Do not use sunscreen on the treatment area during radiation treatments and for 2 weeks after the completion of treatment. Once the skin has healed a sunscreen, with SPF of 30 or higher, should always be applied to the treated area due to permanent sensitivity to the sun.

• **Swimming:** Swimming may be allowed ONLY if the skin in the treatment area is intact. Please discuss with your radiation therapist whether or not swimming is advisable for you. Remove your wet swimsuit after swimming if it is in contact with the treated area and rinse your skin using the washing instructions mentioned above. Avoid swimming if the skin starts to break down.
Your skin reaction will be monitored by your radiation therapy team. Should your skin become itchy or begin to breakdown, please inform your radiation therapist. Your skin reaction may increase in severity 1-2 weeks following treatments. **You are advised to follow all skin care guidelines listed above for 2 weeks following the end of your radiation treatments or until your skin has healed completely.** You can contact your radiation oncology nurse (613-737-7700 ext. ) in the first two weeks after treatment if you are concerned with the condition of your skin. Following this two weeks period after the end of treatment, you are to contact your patient designated nurse with any questions related to side effects. Contact information will be provided on your last day of treatment.

**Radiation Induced Fatigue**

You may experience some level of fatigue during the course of your treatment. Fatigue is the feeling of being mentally and/or physically tired. You may already be feeling tired as it is one of the most common symptoms associated with cancer. This lack of energy can get in the way of your normal functioning making it harder to concentrate and bringing down your mood. Some patients may feel even more tired in the first two weeks following their radiation treatments. It may take a few weeks to return to how you felt before the treatments.

**Management**

- **Food:** Eat a balanced diet and drink plenty of fluids.
- **Set priorities:** Continue with regular daily activities, however, only perform most important tasks if fatigue increases.
- **Rest:** Take short naps during the day if required. Aim to get the majority of your sleep at night.
- **Stay active:** Physical activity and exercise can help to minimize the effects of fatigue. Take a brisk 20-30 min walk daily if you are able.
Let your radiation therapy team know if you are feeling very fatigued, sleepy, depressed or are having difficulty performing everyday tasks. Your radiation therapy team can direct you to other resources as required.

**Shoulder Discomfort**

Some patients experience discomfort and a decrease in range of motion of the shoulder. Only the shoulder on the treated side would be affected. Daily shoulder exercises should be performed. Let your radiation therapy team know if you are experiencing shoulder discomfort.

**Sore Throat**

If your supra-clavicular nodal area (shoulder) is also being treated, you may develop a sore throat. If this happens please inform your radiation therapy team.

**Other Side-Effects**

If you experience side effects other than those listed in this pamphlet, please notify your radiation therapy team and you will be referred to the appropriate health professional.