

Radiation Therapy — Breast or Chestwall

About the Radiation Oncology Team

Radiation oncologists are the doctors who oversee the care of people undergoing radiation treatment. Other members involved in the Radiation Oncology Team include radiation therapists, radiation oncology nurses, medical physicists, dosimetrists, social workers, dietitians and communication clerks.

Understanding Radiation Therapy

Radiation therapy is used to kill tumours, control tumour growth or to relieve symptoms. Radiation works within tumour cells by damaging their ability to multiply. When these cells die, the body naturally eliminates them. Healthy cells in the treated area will be affected by the radiation, but unlike cancerous cells, they are able to heal themselves.

Medical Imaging

During a course of radiation, medical imaging (similar to x-ray or CT scans) will be used by your Radiation Oncology Team to ensure you are in the correct position. These images may also be used for clinical development and/or to aid in the education of health care team members within Radiation Oncology. Your personal health information will be protected according to the Personal Health Information Act of Manitoba.

Possible Side Effects

Radiation affects each individual differently. Radiation only affects the area being treated. The side effects from radiation can include:

- **Fatigue** is a daily lack of energy; a feeling of tiredness, weakness or exhaustion. It may come on suddenly and it does not result from activity or exertion. It usually starts during your second to third week of radiation treatments and progresses as the treatments continue. Fatigue will usually subside within eight to twelve weeks after your last day of treatment, but may last longer.
- **Skin Reactions** can begin two to four weeks after starting treatment. The skin may start to become pink, resembling a sunburn. As treatment continues, the severity of the skin reaction may progress. Your Radiation Oncology Team will provide you with additional information on **Basic Skin Care during Radiation**.

Additional Facts about Radiation Therapy

- Radiation is a local, targeted therapy.
- Radiation cannot be seen or felt. The actual delivery of radiation treatment is painless.
- External radiation therapy does not make you radioactive.

Source:

http://www.cancercare.mb.ca/home/patients_and_family/treatment_services/radiation_therapy/

Important

Characteristics of Potential Skin Reactions

Erythema—radiated skin may become pink to red in colour with mild swelling, burning, and itching.

Dry Desquamation—radiated skin may become dry, itchy scaly, and flaky. The skin may peel and/or break open making it more vulnerable to infections.

Moist Desquamation—radiated skin may peel, blister and have clear yellow drainage.

- The initial skin reaction may present as erythema; the skin may start to appear pink, resembling a sunburn, and may become dry and itchy. The skin may further progress to dry desquamation. The skin may become increasingly red, tender and dry. It may become scaly and begin to peel. Ask your Radiation Oncology Team for additional information about caring for your skin should you experience **Erythema and Dry Desquamation**.
- If dry desquamation has occurred, the skin may progress to moist desquamation. The skin becomes thin, blistered and begins to weep. The fluid may be clear or milky in color and/or have an odor. At this point further management with dressing changes and prescription creams may be required. Ask your Radiation Oncology Team for additional information for, and assistance with caring for your skin should you experience **Moist Desquamation**.

Possible Side Effects — continued

- **Mild to Moderate Breast/Chestwall Swelling.** You may experience some tenderness or discomfort within the breast/chestwall.
- **Cough.** You may develop a slight cough while on treatment as a small part of the lung is being treated.

If you experience any of these side effects, inform a member of your Radiation Oncology Team.

Most of these side effects will begin to subside within two to four weeks after your radiation treatments are complete. It may take up to six to eight weeks for them to go away.

Late side effects may begin at six months after radiation therapy is over. They will vary depending on the area that was treated and the radiation dose received. Everyone reacts to radiation differently and every patient's healing process is different. Ask your Radiation Oncology Team for additional information about **Late Effects**.

Caring for Yourself During Treatment

It is important to take care of yourself while you are having treatment. Here are some helpful hints that will help you cope with the side effects of treatment.

Reminder!

Continue with your daily activities

Rest when you need to

Eat a well balanced diet

- Refer to the **Radiation Therapy Breast or Chestwall—Basic Skin Care** information sheet given to you by your Radiation Oncology Team. This sheet has information about caring for your skin during radiation therapy.
- Continue with your daily activities including exercise—particularly range of motion exercises. Rest when required and eat a well balanced diet. Begin recommended skin care on the first day of your radiation treatments and continue until the skin reaction has passed. Skin reactions in the treatment area may continue to develop for approximately two weeks after your last treatment.

- The following information sheets are available should you experience side effects:
 - **Radiation Therapy Breast or Chestwall — Skin Changes/Reactions: Erythema and Dry Desquamation**
 - **Radiation Therapy Breast or Chestwall — Skin Changes: Moist Desquamation**
 - **Caring for Yourself After Radiation**

Support

At CCMB we have many different support systems available to help you during this period in your life (see box).

If you have not received a "Patient & Family Information Guide", please let your Radiation Oncology team know. If you have interest in any of these services or want a referral, please ask a member of your Radiation Oncology team or contact the phone numbers provided.

Medical Contact Information

Medical issues during treatment hours: Call 204-787-2225 or 204-787-2252

Urgent medical issues after hours or weekends: Contact the Radiation Oncologist on call at 204-787-2071.

CCMB Urgent Care: 204-787-8900

Emergencies: Go directly to your closest Emergency Department or dial **911**.

Support Services

Breast Health Centre—phone
204-235-3906 or 1-888-501-5219

Breast & Gyne Cancer Centre of Hope—phone 204-788-8080 or
1-888-660-4866

Psychosocial Services—phone
204-787-2109 or 1-866-561-1026

- Dietitian
- Guardian Angel Room
- Patient and Family Resource Centre
- Patient Representative
- Physiotherapy
- Sexuality Counselor
- Spiritual Health Specialist

Housing/Transportation

- Lenox Bell Lodge (for out of town patients)—
phone 204-787-4271
- Volunteer Driver Program (for city residents)—
phone 1-800-263-6750

Radiation Therapy Breast or Chestwall — Basic Skin Care

There are things you can do every day to take care of your skin during radiation.

You should start the following recommendations on the first day of your treatment and continue them until you are finished radiation and completely healed.

Promote Skin Hygiene — *keep radiated skin clean*

- Short, gentle, low pressure showers or baths with lukewarm Water.
- Mild soap may be used gently, if desired.
- Do not scrub the skin in the treatment area.
- Pat skin dry. Do not rub.
- Do not use a wash cloth in treatment areas.
- Deodorants and antiperspirants can be used on intact skin. Patients may continue to use deodorants and antiperspirants (includes aluminum based) if they wish. There is no evidence that skin reactions will be any worse. **Stop use if a skin reaction develops.**
- Do not freshly apply deodorant/antiperspirant on the day of your treatment until after treatment.

Promote Comfort

- Wear loose fitting non-binding clothing (e.g. soft breathable fabric like cotton; sports bra with wide band).

Prevent Infections

- Good hand washing.
- Do not use talcum, baby powder or cornstarch in treatment areas.

Protect from the Skin from Injury

- Do not use tape or bandages in treatment field.
- Do not scratch (e.g. keep your nails short).
- Do not wear jewelry over treatment area.
- Avoid using ice packs, heating pads and hot water bottles on the treatment area. You may not be able to feel extreme temperature changes in the radiated areas and you may cause an injury.
- Do not swim in lakes or pools if you have a radiation skin reaction. If the treatment area is intact, swimming in pools or lakes is permissible. After swimming immediately remove swimsuit and rinse the skin.
- Do not use hot tubs and saunas.
- Do not shave in treatment area (if necessary use an electric shaver instead).
- Do not use products containing alcohol, alpha hydroxyl acids, perfumes or other drying agents in treatment areas.
- Do not use petroleum based products.
- Do not freshly apply moisturizers within a two hour period before treatment.
- Do not use tanning lamps/salons.
- Avoid vigorous rubbing in the treatment area.

 Reminder!

Do not freshly apply moisturizer within a two hour period before treatment.

Do not freshly apply deodorant/antiperspirant on the day of your treatment until after treatment.

Protect from Environment

- Treatment area should not be exposed to the sun.
- Cover treatment area with clothing and wear a wide brimmed hat to protect from the sun and wind.
- Use a sunscreen (SPF 30 or higher) if the treatment area cannot be kept out of the sun and as long as the skin is not open. Wash off the sun screen after being in the sun.
- Do not freshly apply sunscreen within a two hour period before treatment.

Keep Your Skin Healthy

- Drink enough fluids. Females should drink approximately 2.2 litres (9 cups) and males 3 litres (13 cups) total fluids per day.
- Limit how many drinks with caffeine you have each day. This includes coffee, tea and colas. It is recommended not to have more than 237-300 mL or 400 mg of caffeine per day. Having more caffeine can lead to dehydration.



Moisturizers should be non-scented, lanolin free, and alcohol free.
Use at least 2–3 times per day.

STOP using moisturizers if your skin becomes open **AND** call a member of your Radiation Oncology team!

- Follow Canada’s Food Guide for good nutrition. Make sure you are eating enough protein. This can help your skin to heal.
- If you are having trouble eating and/or are experiencing weight loss, talk to your Radiation Oncology Team; they may refer you to see a dietician. You can take a multivitamin/mineral supplement to help you meet your nutritional needs.
- For diabetics, it is important to keep your blood sugar levels within your recommended range. If the blood sugar is too high, there may be delayed healing of the radiated skin or an increased risk for infection.
- Use a non-scented, lanolin free, alcohol free moisturizer (e.g. glaxal base cream) on your skin at least 2-3 times per day throughout treatment. **If your skin becomes open, stop using the moisturizer and call your Radiation Oncology Team.** Remember, do not freshly apply moisturizers within a two hour period before treatment.

- Aloe Vera gel can be used to cool the skin. It does not moisturize skin.

Additional Notes:



Advice is available at any time!

JUST ASK a member of your Radiation Oncology Team!