



Royal Cornwall Hospitals
NHS Trust

Radiotherapy to your breast or chest wall



One + all | we care

The name of your consultant is:

.....

The radiographer who explained the treatment to you is:

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You can contact us on:

Tel: 01872 258340 - 9am to 5pm

What is radiotherapy?

Radiotherapy treats cancer by using high energy X-rays. These X-rays destroy cancer cells while doing as little harm as possible to normal cells. Radiotherapy is often given following surgery to reduce the risk of the cancer coming back, or it may be given instead of surgery if the cancer is inoperable. It may also be given before or after chemotherapy.

Radiotherapy is completely painless and treatment takes between 10–20 minutes.

How often will I need treatment?

Radiotherapy is usually given as a course of treatment. It is given daily during the week with a break at weekends. The course lasts between 3 to 5 weeks. Your oncologist (cancer specialist) will decide how many treatments you need.

What is a planning scan?

Before you start radiotherapy it is essential that we carefully plan the area to be treated. The most accurate way of doing this is by means of a CT scan. To have the scan you will be asked to lie on a special breast board and place both arms in arm rests. You will then be asked to keep still and breathe normally. The scan takes about 10 minutes and is completely painless.

At the end of the CT scan you will be asked if we may make some permanent dots (tattoos) on your skin. These will be small dots that act as reference points and are used to ensure that you are lying in the same position each time you are treated.

What happens on my first day of treatment?

One of the radiographers will collect you from the waiting room and explain exactly how your treatment will be given.

In the treatment room you will be asked to remove your clothes from the waist up. If you wish to wear a vest rather than a bra, you could keep this on and the radiographers will pull it down when you are on the couch. If you prefer to change into a gown before entering the treatment room, you can use a changing cubicle and can use either a hospital gown or bring your own from home.

The radiographers will position you correctly using the tattoos and will then leave the room to begin the treatment. The radiographers will watch you via TV monitor throughout the treatment and they can also hear you.

Each treatment session lasts about 10 minutes and during this time you will not feel any pain or other sensations. For the first four days of your treatment a short CT scan (CBCT) will be taken. This may then be repeated daily or weekly at the radiographer's discretion. This is to ensure the accuracy of your treatment.

You will have the option to see a Review Radiographer each week to discuss any side effects you may be experiencing.

What side effects can I expect?

Short term side effects

These are likely to occur during and immediately after radiotherapy and usually settle quite quickly. You will be seen weekly by a review radiographer who will monitor and treat any side effects.

- **Reddening of the skin** – this may occur towards the end of the treatment and may become worse 1–2 weeks after the treatment has finished.

The skin may blister in skin folds such as under your arm or under your breast. If this does happen the review radiographer will give you a liquid dressing to apply to the affected area.

To minimise this reaction we advise the following:

- shower rather than bath
- use a mild non perfumed soap
- dry skin carefully with a soft towel
- use a mild non perfumed body lotion and deodorant
- do not shave under your arm on affected side
- avoid wearing a bra if possible, or wear a soft cotton bra
- do not expose the treated area to the sun. Your skin in this area will be sensitive to the sun following your treatment so you should be careful to use high factor sun creams over that area in the future
- you may swim during treatment, providing your skin has not blistered.
- **Breast tenderness** – This may occur towards the end of treatment and worsen for 1-2 weeks after. If necessary a mild pain killer such as Paracetamol may be taken. If the breast becomes swollen and hot tell the radiographers who are treating you as this could be a sign of an infection within the breast tissue and may require a course of anti biotics.
- **Tiredness** – This may also occur during the latter part of the treatment and is likely to continue for several weeks after treatment has finished.

Are there any long term side effects?

Radiotherapy can cause side effects which may occur months or years after treatment has finished. Improved planning and treatment techniques have made these long term side effects less likely to happen.

- **Skin changes** – following radiotherapy your breast may feel firmer. You may also have small red marks on your skin caused by tiny broken blood vessels. This occurs in less than 10% of women and for the majority the cosmetic effect of radiotherapy is very good.
- **Shrinkage of the breast** – some degree of shrinkage may be noticed in about 30% of women over five to ten years. However, the changes are marked in less than 10% of women.

- **Breast pain and tenderness** – your breast may become tender, swollen and pinker in colour several months after treatment. This discomfort is noticed by less than 10% of women.
- **Restricted arm movement** – if the lymph nodes in the axilla have been treated some restriction in the range of shoulder movements may be noticed. This is a problem in less than 5% of the women who have had this treatment.
- **Lymphoedema** – swelling of the arm (lymphoedema) may develop in less than 20% of women. It is caused by scar tissue that may form after surgery to the armpit or radiotherapy to the armpit. Lymphoedema is permanent but can be improved with the help of a specialist nurse. It is a problem in less than 5% of women.
- **Lung damage** – damage to lung tissue may cause some degree of breathlessness in less than 10% of women. It is a problem for less than 5%.
- **Damage to bone** – radiotherapy can make the underlying rib bones more brittle. A rib fracture may occur in less than 5% of women. A fracture usually heals without treatment.
- **Damage to heart muscle** – damage to heart muscle to a woman who has had radiotherapy to the left breast area is thought to be much lower than 1%.
- **Damage to nerves** – damage to the nerves supplying the arm causing pain and weakness in the arm is a very rare side effect, occurring in less than one in 1000 women who have had radiotherapy to the axillary lymph nodes.

What can I expect afterwards?

- **Exercise** – it is important to keep the arm and shoulder of your treated side well exercised. If you have not had an exercise booklet from your Breast Care Nurse please ask for one.
- **Nausea** – occasionally people experience mild nausea, especially at the beginning of treatment. If you experience this please let us know and we will be able to advise you.
- **Diet** – try to eat a healthy balanced diet and drink plenty of fluids. If you feel tired rest as much as possible, but try to maintain a normal daily routine without 'overdoing it'.

General advice

Everyone having radiotherapy is different. Your treatment is specific to you and so is the way you react to the treatment. If you are worried about anything at all, however trivial it may seem, please mention it to one of the radiographers and we may be able to help.

Data Protection

All personal images and photographs taken during the planning and delivery of radiotherapy will be used in accordance with the trust's policy on the protection and use of patient information.

If you would like this leaflet in large print, braille, audio version or in another language, please contact the General Office on 01872 252690

