

*If you have
any questions,
please ask a
member of
your care team.*

Radiation Therapy for Breast Cancer

You and your physician have chosen radiation therapy as part of your breast cancer treatment. This handout describes:

- What to expect
- How to care for your skin during treatment
- How to reduce side effects
- How to increase your comfort during treatment
- Resources for additional support

Treatment schedule

Most radiation therapy consists of 15 to 35 daily treatments. You will have treatments Monday through Friday. Your therapist will work with you to set up daily appointment times. Each appointment lasts 10 to 30 minutes. Please allow 1 hour for these appointments. This will give you enough time for:

- X-rays
- Meetings with your physician or nurse
- Any unexpected delays

Your first appointment may start with X-rays. Your care team uses the X-ray results to make sure you are in the right position on the table.

You will meet with your physician at least once a week on _____.
They will check your treatment results and side effects during these visits. You will also have the chance to talk to them about any questions or concerns.

Skin care

Radiation affects each person differently. During your therapy, you may notice skin changes in the treated area. Some changes may include:

- During the first 1 to 2 weeks, your skin may tan or become reddened. Sometimes you will get a rash.
- After 3 to 4 weeks, your skin may become red, dry and itchy. It may feel burned. It may also peel.
- After 4 to 5 weeks, you may have more reddening or blistering under the breast or underarm.

These changes are normal. Your skin will slowly begin to heal when therapy is over.

With proper care, skin reactions may be milder. To help with discomfort and protect your skin from more irritation, follow these guidelines for skin care to the radiation area:

- Clean the area with a mild, unscented soap for dry or sensitive skin. Some suggested soaps are Basis® for Sensitive Skin, Dove® for Sensitive Skin, Camay®, Cetaphil® or Oil of Olay®. Avoid antibacterial soap.
- Use lukewarm water. Hot water can cause more irritation.
- Use a soft cloth or your hand to gently clean the area.
- Pat your skin dry. Do not rub.
- Completely dry any creases, especially under the arm and breast.
- Do not shave the underarm on the treatment side.
- Do not use heating pads or ice packs on the treated area. Extreme temperatures can cause more damage.
- Do not expose your skin to the sun.

Skin creams

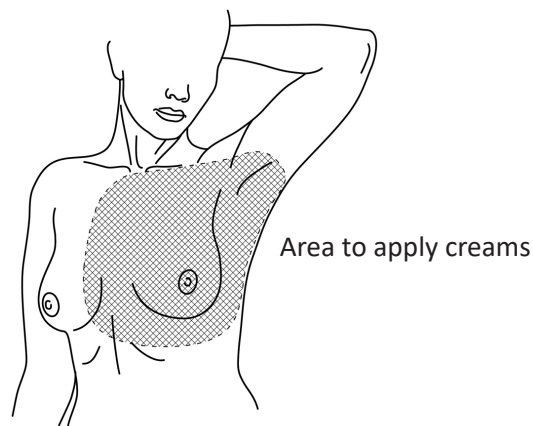
Your care team may suggest skin creams. They can help to heal and soothe your skin. Be sure to check with your physician or nurse before using any skin care product.

We will prescribe you a topical skin cream known as mometasone. Start applying the cream **after** your first treatment. Then apply the cream 2 times a day, once in the morning and once at bedtime. **Do not apply any cream within 2 hours before your radiation treatment.**

How to apply the cream:

1. Apply a thin layer of mometasone to the entire shaded area (see Figure 1).
2. Let it dry.
3. Apply a moisturizer on top of the same area. Use 1 of the following suggested moisturizers:
 - Miaderm® (available online)
 - Rejuvaskin® (available online)
 - Aquaphor®
 - Aloe vera (without alcohol)

Figure 1



During the last few weeks of treatment, you may have severe redness or blistering under the breast or underarm. If this happens, tell your physician, nurse or radiation therapist. Applying a thick layer of Aquaphor® often gives you relief and comfort. You may cover the area with a bandage to protect your clothing.

Your nurse will explain any treatments your physician may prescribe you.

If you are having pain, please contact your physician, advanced practice provider or another member of your care team. They may suggest ibuprofen (Advil®), acetaminophen (Tylenol®) or naproxen (Aleve®) for pain relief.

Deodorants

Before using a deodorant, check for warning labels about using it on red, irritated skin. Do not use deodorants with aluminum. Some deodorants you can use include:

- Alra® (available at the hospital's Walgreens)
- Tom's of Maine®
- Other natural, metal-free products

Do not use deodorant within 2 hours of treatment on the affected side.

Swimming

Exercise is important to your health and well-being. But chlorine in swimming pools may dry and irritate the skin. Be sure to gently wash the chlorine off your skin after swimming. If the treated skin becomes red, do not go into swimming pools.

Swelling

Radiation treatments may sometimes cause breast swelling (edema). The skin may then feel sore or tender. To reduce the effects, avoid sleeping on the treated side and wear a good supportive bra. Edema may last several months after treatment is over.

If the surgeon removed your lymph nodes, you may be at risk for arm swelling (lymphedema). If you do notice arm swelling, lift your arm above the level of the heart. Tell your physician or nurse right away. Lymphedema often starts slowly. Or it may happen after an injury, insect bite, burn, muscle strain or arm infection.

Do not use the affected arm for heavy lifting, or household and yard chores, like scrubbing, shoveling or raking.

Clothing

Wear loose-fitting clothing made of cotton or other soft knit fabrics. Avoid clothes that fit tightly over the breast or underarm. If your clothes leave a pressure mark on your skin, try a different size or style.

Wear protective clothing to avoid sun exposure to the treated area. Do this **during** and **after** therapy. The sun gives off ultraviolet radiation that can cause severe sunburn. Apply SPF 15 to non-treated areas to prevent sunburn.

Diet and supplements

Good nutrition is important for your health during breast cancer treatment. Eat a normal diet. Talk with your physician or nurse about any special diets. Eat healthy foods based on your lifestyle and personal preferences. Do not take vitamin doses above the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) daily allowance. This information will be on the vitamin label. High doses of vitamins A, C and E, multivitamins, and herbs may affect the effectiveness of radiation treatment.

A dietitian can help you if you have any questions about your diet or if you are losing too much weight. Please ask your nurse for more information about diet and supplements.

Fatigue

Fatigue (extreme tiredness) is a common side effect of radiation treatment. Levels of fatigue are different for every patient. Stress about your illness, daily trips for treatment, and the effects of radiation on normal cells may make you more tired. Fatigue is often worse at the end of the week and may seem to improve over the weekend. To help with fatigue, try to:

- Keep active.
- Exercise.
- Plan activities early in the week and in the morning, when your energy levels are higher.
- Try to keep regular hours.
- Wake up at the same time every day.

Listen to your body's needs. For more information about fatigue, talk with your physician or nurse.

Hormones

You may notice signs of menopause after estrogen replacement therapy ends, during chemotherapy or with tamoxifen therapy. These signs often include "hot flashes," night sweats, trouble sleeping or mood swings. There are medications that can help. Talk with your physician or nurse for more information.

Smoking

Nicotine from smoking increases radiation side effects. It can also interfere with your body's ability to recover from surgery or radiation. If you need help quitting, please talk with your physician or nurse. Northwestern Medicine offers a virtual "Courage to Quit" smoking cessation program that may help. Call 630.933.4234 to register.

Your well-being

While a cure for breast cancer is possible if detected early, it may still affect your physical and mental well-being. The following can help your mental well-being:

- Talking with a professional about breast cancer and its impact on your life.
- Meeting with a licensed social worker who can give you resources. They are available during the day and by appointment.
- Visiting Northwestern Memorial's Wellness Institute to review the list of programs that may help recovery.
- Talking to women who have completed breast cancer therapy. This can provide encouragement and insight into treatment in a way that your healthcare team may not.

Remember to only follow trusted information about the disease and its treatment to help your recovery.

For questions or concerns

You can call the Department of Radiation Therapy at 312.472.3650 (TTY: 711), Monday through Friday, 8:00 am to 4:30 pm. An answering service will take your call after hours.

Resources

Support and recovery programs

For additional information about recovery and cancer support:

- Northwestern Medicine Radiation Oncology Social Worker
312.926.4884
- Reach to Recovery (American Cancer Society)
1.800.227.2345 (1.800.ACS.2345)
- Gilda's Club
312.464.9900

National organizations

For general information about cancer:

- Susan G. Komen for the Cure
1.877.465.6636 (1.877.GO KOMEN)
komen.org
- American Cancer Society
1.800.227.2345
cancer.org
- National Cancer Institute
1.800.422.6237 (1.800.4.CANCER)
cancer.gov

Northwestern Medicine dietitians

For patients who wish to see an oncology dietitian, contact:

- Northwestern Medicine Lurie Cancer Center Supportive Oncology
312.472.5823
- Northwestern Medicine Center for Lifestyle Medicine
312.695.2300

Cancer physical rehabilitation

For a referral related to lymphedema, contact:

- Shirley Ryan Ability Lab
Dr. Samman Shahpar
1.844.355.2253

Social work

For social work-related issues or help with finding resources and services, contact:

- Northwestern Medicine Department of Radiation Oncology
312.926.4884
- American Cancer Society
1.800.227.2345
- Northwestern Medicine Lurie Cancer Center
312.472.5820

Cancer support organizations

For peer support during and after cancer therapy, contact:

- Imerman Angels
1.866.463.7626 (1.866.IMERMAN)
imermanangels.org
- Cancer Hope Network
1.800.552.4366
cancerhopenetwork.org

Wellness centers

Wellness centers offer free cancer support for patients and loved ones, including support groups for adults and children. To search for a center near to you, go to:

- Cancer Wellness Center
cancerwellness.org