

# DEALING WITH THE SIDE EFFECTS OF RADIATION THERAPY TREATMENTS TO THE BREAST

**These are general guidelines only and are not intended to replace talking with your health care providers. Be sure to tell your doctor, nurse, or radiation therapist about any side effects that you notice.**

The side effects of radiation treatment vary from patient to patient. You may have no side effects or only a few mild ones through your course of treatment. The side effects that you have depend mostly on the radiation dose and the part of your body that is treated. Side effects may occur early or late. Early side effects occur soon after treatment begins and usually are gone within a few weeks of finishing therapy. Late side effects may take months or years to develop and usually are permanent.

Fortunately, most side effects will go away in time. In the meantime, there are ways to reduce discomfort. If you have a side effect that is especially severe, the doctor may prescribe a break in your treatments or change your treatment in some way. Be sure to tell your doctor, nurse, or radiation therapist about any side effects that you notice. They can help you treat the problems and tell you how to lessen the chances that the side effects will come back.

Some of the side effects from radiation therapy are at the worst when the treatment has been completed. It may take between 2-6 weeks for the side effects to start to improve.

## **Fatigue**

You may feel unusually tired, especially during the latter weeks of treatment.

How you can manage this side effect:

- Get rest by taking naps during the day
- Light exercise or physical activity can improve your energy level
- Avoid caffeine or colas in the evening
- Ask for help with chores and errands from family and friends
- Eat meals regularly to help keep your energy level up

## Skin Changes

Your skin in the treatment area will become warm, itchy or red - as if you have a sunburn. It may peel or become moist and tender. You may notice a loss of hair or decreased perspiration within the treated area.

How you can manage this side effect:



- Avoid rubbing, scratching or scrubbing the affected area.
- Wash with warm water and mild soap (e.g. Dove, Ivory, baby soap). Pat your skin dry with a soft towel.
- Avoid prolonged contact with water; do not use bubble baths or oils.
- Dust the treated area with Johnson's baby powder or cornstarch.
- Use only an electric razor if you need to shave within treated area.
- Do not put any other ointment, cream, lotion or powder on the treated area unless your doctor has prescribed it.
- Do not put on cosmetics, shaving lotions or perfumes on the treated area.
- Do not put medical tape or bandages on the treated area.
- Wear loose fitting and soft clothing against your treated skin (e.g. cotton), avoid wearing a bra.
- Do not put anything very hot or cold (e.g. heating pad or ice pack) on the treatment area.
- Do not expose treated area to direct sunlight. Wear protective clothing to minimize sun exposure.
- After treatment avoid direct exposure of area to the sun and apply sunscreen, with a minimum of 15 SPF, if exposing area to sun.

What works for me:

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## Feelings during Radiation Treatment

Having cancer and going through treatment may be stressful. At some points during your radiation treatment, you may feel anxious, depressed, afraid, frustrated, angry, helpless or alone. It is normal to have these kinds of feelings. If you are fatigued as well, it can make it harder to cope with these feelings.

How you can manage this:

- Light exercise such as walking may help to relieve stress
- The use of relaxation techniques and meditation may help you to feel calmer
- Try to keep a regular sleeping pattern
- Talk about your feelings with someone you trust such as a family member, friend, spiritual advisor or health professional
- Consider joining a cancer support group to meet and talk to other people who are facing similar problems. To find a support group please contact a social worker at the Cancer Centre or your Canadian Cancer Society Office
- Talk to your radiation oncologist, nurse or radiation therapist. They can refer you to a healthcare professional that is trained specifically to help with these types of problems

What works for me:

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