

Having radiotherapy to your breast or chest wall

Your doctors have recommended that you have a course of radiotherapy. This factsheet provides information about your radiotherapy so that you know what the treatment involves and what the possible side effects are. We will ask you to sign a consent form that confirms that you agree to receive this treatment. You can change your mind at any time, however it is strongly recommended that you complete a course of treatment once you have started.

What is radiotherapy?

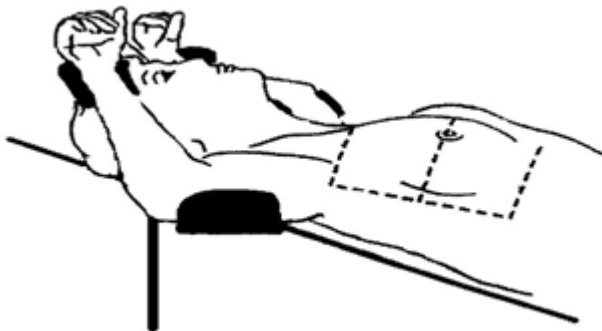
Radiotherapy is a type of radiation treatment using x-rays. The treatment is given using a machine called a linear accelerator and you cannot feel treatment delivery. It takes between 10 and 20 minutes to deliver the treatment.

How does radiotherapy work?

Research has shown that having radiotherapy can reduce the risk of the cancer recurring and improve overall survival following surgical removal of a breast cancer. Radiotherapy can also be used to treat locally advanced breast cancer to stop further growth or to enable surgery to be performed after completion of treatment. Radiation damages all the cells in the treatment area. The healthy normal cells can repair while any abnormal cancer cells that might remain cannot recover.

Planning your radiotherapy treatment (pre-treatment)

Before starting the radiotherapy, we will need to take a CT scan. You will lie in the treatment position so that we can design the radiotherapy according to your individual needs. Please see The Royal Marsden factsheet *Having radiotherapy computerised tomography (CT) planning* for further information.



The treatment will be planned specifically for you, to make sure that the area for treatment is accurately targeted with the least amount of normal tissues affected. This planning can sometimes take up to four weeks to complete.



The CT planning session will usually take about 30 minutes.

After your planning session, a time and date to start the radiotherapy treatment will be confirmed.

Radiotherapy treatment

You will need to report to the receptionist at the Radiotherapy Department every day when you arrive. The receptionist will let the radiographers working on your machine know that you have arrived. On your first visit, the radiographers will set aside some time to talk you through the treatment and answer any extra questions you may have, so please arrive twenty minutes before your treatment time on that day.

You will usually be given radiotherapy treatment every day, Monday to Friday (except for bank holidays). Sometimes this is changed to treatment three times a week or just once a week. Your doctor will discuss this with you.

The radiographers will take you into the treatment room and position you on the treatment couch as you were for the planning scan. The radiographers will explain what they need to do and may ask you to make small movements so that the marks that were put on your skin during the planning stage line up with laser lights in the treatment room. When they are happy with the position, the staff will leave the room to deliver the treatment.

You will be alone in the room for a few minutes while the radiotherapy machine is switched on. The radiographers can see and hear you at all times when you are in the treatment room. If you have any problems, they will advise you to call out or raise your hand for attention and they will come in to help you.

Some treatment machines have background music playing to help you feel more comfortable. The radiotherapy machine will move around you into different positions but it will not touch you. You will hear a buzzing noise during treatment but you will not feel anything.

Please see our policy on monitoring in radiotherapy in The Royal Marsden booklet *Radiotherapy; your questions answered* for further information.

Care during your course of treatment

The radiographers who you see each day can give you advice if you have any problems. They can also contact someone from the radiotherapy team to come and see you for specialist advice.

Smoking will increase the side effects of radiotherapy. Please ask if you want help to give up smoking during your treatment.

Side effects can occur during the treatment or can appear several months and years after the treatment. Your consent form includes details of the likelihood of you getting any of these side effects as there are many different types of radiotherapy treatment for breast cancer. Sometimes only the breast or chest wall is treated whilst in other circumstances adjacent areas including lymph nodes are also treated.

If you have a breast implant, you may also be at risk of internal scarring (fibrosis) leading to replacement or removal of the implant. Your clinical oncology doctor will explain all the side effects that may apply to your specific case.



Early side effects (during and immediately after your course of treatment)

- **Tiredness** (fatigue) is common. The tiredness will slowly improve after your treatment has finished.
- **Skin reaction** – the skin in the treatment area may become pink or, if you have more pigmented skin, it may become darker. It may also feel dry and itchy; this is common and nothing to be concerned about. Your skin reaction may reach a peak 10-14 days after the treatment has finished. You can use a light moisturiser on the skin in the treatment area. Avoid using very thick or medicated creams. We will give you skin care advice when you start treatment.
- **Skin blistering** – this can happen in areas of friction, such as under your breast and under your arm. These moist areas may become sore and you will need specialist skin care advice. This may happen after you have finished your treatment.
- **Hair loss** – if you are having treatment under your arm you may experience loss of any hair in that area. The hair will usually regrow after three to four months.
- **Swelling and tenderness** - the area receiving treatment may feel sore.
- **Sore throat or pain on swallowing** - your doctor will advise you if the lymph glands at the base of your neck are included in the area for treatment.

All these symptoms will settle within a few weeks of completing the treatment.

Late side effects (usually from three months after treatment)

- **Change in skin texture and colour** - the skin may be darker after treatment and may also feel less supple.
- **Change in breast size** - if you have had breast conservation the breast may be smaller after treatment. There can be a change in firmness or you may have some swelling, tenderness or increased sensitivity.
- **Lung fibrosis** - the lung directly under the chest wall on the treatment side may be permanently damaged by the treatment. This may cause a temporary cough or shortness of breath, but does not usually cause symptoms.
- **Fluid retention and swelling (lymphoedema) of the arm** - this can happen after surgery under the arm (axilla) but there is an increased risk if the radiotherapy treatment includes this area. Your clinical oncology doctor will discuss this side effect if we are including your axilla.
- **Rib tenderness or fracture** - a fracture is a very rare side effect (less than one in a thousand)
- **Cardiac (heart) damage** - this is only if the left side of your chest is treated; your doctor will discuss this with you if you are at risk.
- **Shoulder stiffness** - this is only a risk if this area has been included in the treatment.

Remember these are possible side effects and you may not experience any of them.

Follow up after your treatment

We will discuss your follow up options at the end of your treatment.



Please make sure you ask any questions that you need to and that you feel comfortable with what you have been told.

Contact details

Your consultant is _____

If you have any questions or concerns about your treatment, you can contact your Clinical Nurse Specialist (CNS).

You may also call The Royal Marsden switchboard **0208 642 6011** and ask to speak to your Consultant's secretary. We can then arrange for one of the team to speak with you.

Alternatively, please call:

The Royal Marsden Macmillan Hotline: 020 8915 6899
(available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week)

If you need to change your radiotherapy appointments, please phone the radiotherapy **bookings** team on **020 8915 6018** (Monday to Friday, 9am – 5pm).

