

Completing a course of radiotherapy for breast cancer

This leaflet explains how to manage common side effects after your radiotherapy treatment has finished.

Common side effects after a course of radiotherapy for breast cancer

Side effects are likely to become worse in the week or two after completing radiotherapy. For those undergoing a one-week course of radiotherapy, these side-effects may not even appear until two to three weeks after radiotherapy. This is normal, and your symptoms will gradually improve over the next few weeks.

Skin

Your skin will remain sensitive for several weeks after you have completed your treatment. Please continue to be gentle with the skin in the treatment area until it returns to normal.

- If your skin is **not** broken; you can resume using your usual skincare products once the skin reaction has settled.
- If your skin **is** broken; please follow the advice you have been given about dressings and skin care.

Sun exposure

We recommend that you avoid exposing the treated area to direct sunlight and use a high factor (SPF 30 or above) sun block for at least one year after radiotherapy treatment. In the future your skin may show an uneven reaction to UV light in the area that the radiotherapy was given. It is advisable to avoid deliberate sunbathing or sun bed use for this reason.

Pain

If you are experiencing pain due to radiotherapy (such as when you swallow), you can resolve this by taking any simple painkillers you would normally take. This side-effect occurs in a small number of patients undergoing radiotherapy for breast cancer and should resolve within two weeks of treatment being completed.

Diet

Please continue to eat and drink normally. You may feel more dehydrated in the 2-3 weeks after radiotherapy has been completed. We advise drinking plenty of water/clear fluids during this period.

Fatigue

You may feel extremely tired for some time after the end of radiotherapy treatment. Walking or light exercise within your physical capabilities can help. Your energy levels will gradually improve



over weeks, or even months. Please allow yourself time to recover and to slowly return to your usual activities.

Mental well-being

It is common to experience a change in your mental well-being after a course of radiotherapy has finished. This can happen as your focus changes from attending each day, to getting back to 'normal life.' There is support available through various avenues.

- Your referring hospital can offer support through your CNS.
- Breast Cancer Now and Maggie's Cancer Centre are charities you can contact which offer both virtual and in-person support.
- Complementary therapies are available through the occupational therapy team – ask for a referral.

Please do ask if there is anything we can help you with.

When will I get the results of my treatment?

For most patients undergoing radiotherapy for breast cancer, there are no blood tests or scans that can tell us that radiotherapy has worked but, we know from results in thousands of people treated in clinical trials that radiotherapy reduces the risk of cancer returning and/or spreading elsewhere in the body. For those who have had radiotherapy to the breast, annual mammograms will be undertaken beginning one year from diagnosis. These mammograms and/or any other investigations will be arranged by the Open Access Follow-Up (OAFU) service.

What should I do if I feel unwell in the next few weeks?

If you have symptoms related to your radiotherapy, please contact your treating consultant's team via their secretary or via the Royal Marsden Hotline on 0208 915 6899. This number is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

If you feel unwell or develop new symptoms unrelated to your radiotherapy before your OAFU appointment, you should contact your key worker, breast care nurse, CNS or the oncology team at your referring hospital. If your referring hospital is the Royal Marsden, the Royal Marsden Hotline can be contacted as above.

If you have medical concerns out of hours and your referring hospital is the Royal Marsden, you can phone the Royal Marsden Hotline: 0208 915 6899. This number is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

How do I make a comment about my treatment?

If you have any suggestions or comments about your treatment, please speak to a member of staff or contact the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS). PALS staff can listen to your concerns, suggestions or queries and help sort out problems on your behalf.

Useful contacts

PALS: 0800 783 7176

Switchboard: Sutton: 020 8642 6011 Chelsea: 020 7352 8171

To contact your consultant's team (weekdays only): Please phone the hospital and ask to be put through to your consultant's secretary. Your consultant's name is on your finishing letter.

