Managing Acute Side Effects of Breast Radiation Therapy

In this booklet you will learn about:

- Common side effects when you receive radiation therapy to your breast
- Tips on managing these side effects
- Where to get help

More information at www.rvh.on.ca
Radiation Side Effects

Side effects caused by radiation therapy to the breast may vary from person to person. These side effects may be affected by other treatments, such as surgery, chemotherapy and hormonal therapy. In this booklet, we have listed some of the more common side effects and helpful tips to manage them. Please speak to your Care Team if you have any questions.

Skin Reaction

What is a skin reaction?

The skin in the treatment area reacts over time to radiation and most patients do not notice any changes until about the second week of treatment. At that time your skin may look slightly pink and change to a darker pink or brown as the treatments continue. Along with the changing colour of the skin, you may also notice the skin start to feel dry, itchy, sensitive and/or tender. The skin reaction will be at its peak at about 7-10 days after all your treatments are complete, but some patients may have little or no skin reaction.

How to Take Care of Your Skin

There are a few simple things that you can do to lessen your skin’s reaction to radiation therapy. Follow these instructions during your treatment and continue until your skin heals completely (usually 2-4 weeks after treatments are complete).
Washing
- Use lukewarm water
- Use a mild, unscented soap for sensitive skin
- Avoid rubbing or scrubbing the area
- Use your hand to gently wash the area
- Pat dry with a soft towel

Moisturizing
- Apply Lubriderm® (unscented, lanolin free) or Glaxal Base® Moisturizing Cream to the treatment area at least twice a day. Stop using the cream if skin begins to peel and is moist-looking.
- Do not use any other creams or lotions in the area that is being treated (unless your Radiation Oncologist told you it is okay)

Clothing
- Wear loose fitting clothing in the affected area
- If possible, do not wear a bra unless your treatment team says it is okay
- Instead of a bra, try soft, cotton camisoles or undershirts
- Be sure to cover the area fully with clothing when in the sun

Things to avoid:
- Extreme hot or cold temperatures on the skin in the treatment area (i.e. ice packs and heating pads)
Things to avoid (continued):

- Shaving and waxing in the under arm of the treated side – use an electric razor if necessary
- Tight or ill-fitting clothes that rub against your skin
- Adhesive tapes or dressings in the treatment area
- Hot tubs, saunas and chlorinated pools
- Swimming in lakes
- All perfumes, lotions, creams, sprays, colognes etc. in the treatment area - except Lubriderm® (unscented, lanolin free) or Glaxal Base® Moisturizing Cream
- If the skin becomes irritated (itchy, red, sore) in the under arm of the treated side during your treatment, stop using deodorant/antiperspirant in the affected area.

Sun Safety

- Keep the treatment area out of natural or artificial sunlight during treatment and for 2-4 weeks after treatment is complete
- Protect the treatment area from the sun by covering the area with clothing (i.e. shirts with high collars), wearing a wide brim hat or staying in the shade
- Do not use sunscreen in the treatment area until the skin is completely healed
Fatigue

What is fatigue?

Fatigue is a general feeling of tiredness. Fatigue is a common side effect of radiation treatments regardless of the area of your body being treated. Not everyone experiences fatigue, but for those who do, it is generally mild and may occur after 2-4 weeks of treatment.

Fatigue can be caused by:

- The physical effects of the treatment
- Travel involved in coming for daily treatments
- The change of your daily schedule
- Pain
- Medications
- Pre-existing medical conditions

Things you can do to help with fatigue:

- Light exercise such as walking
- Take frequent rests during the day
- Eat a well-balanced diet
- Drink at least 8 cups (250ml each) of clear fluids daily
- Ask family and friends for help with daily activities or chores
- Effective pain control. Talk to your Nurse or Radiation Oncologist if you need help managing your pain.
Fatigue (continued)

More tips in the How to Manage Your Fatigue booklet (available in the waiting room or www.rvh.on.ca).

The tiredness will start to improve about 2 weeks after treatment is complete and may take up to a few months to resolve.
Swelling

Breast swelling

Swelling in the breast can occur during treatment. The affected breast may feel fuller than usual or heavy. This is a normal side effect of radiation therapy to the breast. Like other side effects of radiation treatment, this side effect will resolve in 2-4 weeks after treatment is complete.

Arm swelling

After surgery and during or after radiation treatment to the breast, some people experience swelling in their arm. The swelling is caused by the slower drainage of lymph fluid in that arm.

Things you can do to help with arm swelling:

- Keep your arm raised whenever you can throughout the day
- Sleep with your arm raised on a pillow
- Use your arm normally
- Keep up with any exercises given to you (if any) after your surgery

Tell any member of your treatment team if you notice the swelling in your arm getting worse, your arm becomes red or if it starts to feels warm.
For More Information

Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation  www.cbcf.org
Canadian Breast Cancer Network  www.cbcn.ca
Canadian Cancer Society  www.cancer.ca
Look Good Feel Better  www.lgfb.ca
Willow Breast Cancer Support Canada  www.willow.org

You may have other side effects or long term side effects related to your radiation treatment that are not discussed in this pamphlet. For more information on managing the side effects of radiation therapy please speak with a member of your Care Team.