

# Managing Side Effects of Breast Radiation Therapy

*(Includes Radiation Therapy to the Chest Wall)*

## **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

Hudson Regional  
Cancer Program  
North Simcoe Muskoka



Royal Victoria  
Regional Health Centre



**Ontario  
Health**

## ***Radiation Side Effects***

Side effects caused by radiation therapy to the breast or chest wall may vary from person to person. These side effects may be affected by other treatments, such as surgery, chemotherapy, and medications. In this booklet, we have listed some of the more common side effects and helpful tips to manage them. The majority of these side effects may start near the end of the second week of your radiation therapy treatments and may continue for the remainder of your treatment and for about 2-4 weeks after your treatments are complete. You may experience other side effects related to your radiation treatment that are not discussed in this pamphlet. For more information, please speak to a member of your Care Team.

## ***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 10-14 days after all your treatments are complete.

### **How to Take Care of Your Skin During Treatment:**

#### **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<sup>®</sup> (unscented, lanolin free) or Glaxal Base<sup>®</sup> Moisturizing Cream to the treatment area at least twice a day. Make sure the cream is absorbed prior to treatment. Stop using the cream if skin begins to peel and is moist-looking.



Photo of Lubriderm<sup>®</sup> and Glaxal Base<sup>®</sup> Moisturizing Cream.

More on next page....

## ***Skin Reaction (continued...)***

### **Moisturizing (continued...):**

- Do not use any other creams or lotions in the area that is being treated (unless advised by your Care Team).
- Please ask your Care Team about a saline compress if your skin is irritated.

### **Clothing**

- Wear loose fitting clothing in the treatment 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.



Wear loose fitting clothing in treatment area. ✓

### **Things to avoid:**



Extreme hot or cold temperatures on the skin in the treatment area (i.e. ice packs and heating pads).



Shaving and waxing in the under arm of the treated side. Use an electric razor if you must shave.

- Tight or ill-fitting clothes that rub against your skin.
- Adhesive tapes or dressings in the treatment area (unless advised by your Care Team).

## Things to avoid (continued):



Swimming in chlorinated pools and lakes.



Perfumes, colognes and scented products in the treatment area.

- Hot tubs and saunas
- All lotions, creams, and sprays, in the treatment area - **except** Lubriderm<sup>®</sup> (unscented, lanolin free) or Glaxal Base<sup>®</sup> 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.

After treatment is complete and your skin is completely healed, your skin in the treatment area will always be more sensitive to sunlight. You will need to protect your skin with sunscreen or keep it covered with clothing.

# ***Fatigue***

Fatigue is a general feeling of tiredness. Fatigue is a common side effect of cancer treatment. Not everyone will have fatigue, but for those who do, it is usually mild to moderate.

Fatigue can be caused by:

- The cancer
- Treatments including radiation, chemotherapy, and medications
- The travel involved in coming for treatments
- The change in your daily schedule
- The amount of sleep that you get
- Less food and/or fluid intake
- Lack of physical activity and exercise
- Pain, depression, or anxiety



Your medications may cause fatigue.

Things you can do for fatigue:

- Light exercise, such as walking
- Take frequent rests during the day
- Try a relaxing activity to reduce stress
- Drink more fluids daily to keep your body hydrated. If you have fluid restrictions, discuss this with your doctor.
- Ask family/friends for help with daily activities or chores

The tiredness may start to improve about 2 weeks after treatment is complete, depending on the cause, and may take up to a few months to resolve.



Light exercise such as walking may help with fatigue.

# Swelling

## Breast swelling

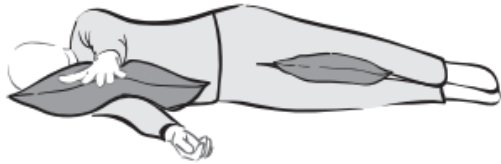
Swelling in the breast can occur during treatment. The affected breast may feel fuller than usual or heavy. This is a normal side effect of radiation therapy to the breast. Like other side effects of radiation treatment, this side effect will resolve in 2-4 weeks after treatment is complete.

## 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 feel warm.

## ***Help is a Phone Call Away***

**If you are having side effects related to your cancer treatment, please contact:**

### **Symptom Support Telephone Service**



**During the day:  
Cancer Centre Symptom Support  
705-728-9090 x43333**



**Evenings, weekends and holidays:  
CareChart 1-877-681-3057**

Please visit [www.rvh.on.ca](http://www.rvh.on.ca) for the latest information and hours of operation.

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Photo of woman with shirt: designed by Kues - Freepik.com

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