



Patient information

# **Radiation therapy to the chest**



This brochure is designed to inform you and your family/carers about radiation therapy. It aims to give you some idea of what to expect during and after your treatment, and we hope to relieve any concerns you may have.

It does not replace discussion with the health professionals involved in your care, and we encourage you to raise questions and concerns.

Our experienced staff members are available to assist you. Please do not hesitate to ask for advice.

## Radiation therapy is the use of radiation to destroy cancer cells

It works because cancer cells are more sensitive to radiation than normal cells. When a small dose of radiation is given each day over several weeks, normal cells can recover from radiation but cancer cells cannot.

Radiation therapy is often given to people who have cancer that arises in the chest (primary cancers) or have spread to the chest or thorax (metastases), such as lung cancer, cancer of the oesophagus and some lymphomas.

Radiation therapy can be used with the aim to cure a cancer or it may be given with the aim to relieve symptoms.



### What are the possible side effects?

Side effects are predictable for most patients, depending on your treatment site, the dose being given, the number of treatments and your general health. Reactions may begin to occur within the second or third week of treatment.

#### Skin reaction

After two or three weeks of treatment your skin may start to become red, itchy and irritated. This reaction normally lasts through the rest of your treatment and settles two to four weeks after treatment has finished. If you feel any discomfort in the treated area, please inform the radiotherapy staff.

#### Fatigue

You may become increasingly tired as you progress toward the end of your treatment. This is a normal reaction to the radiation therapy and each person is affected with varying degrees. Finding a balance between rest and activity will help you cope with this side effect.

#### Pain and discomfort

The nursing staff will give you information about pain control and your doctor will write prescriptions if required. It is important that you follow the pain control instructions, which may include pre-treatment analgesia, to ensure your comfort.

#### Difficulty swallowing [oesophagitis]:

Difficulty swallowing is a common reaction when the oesophagus is in the treatment area. As a result of inflammation of the oesophagus this can feel painful when swallowing or produce a sensation like a 'lump in the throat'. Please report any changes to your treatment team as early measures can control and relieve these symptoms.

#### Cough [bronchial irritation]:

It is common to have a cough associated with a lung tumour itself, or related to infection of the lungs. It is also possible to develop a cough specifically related to radiation therapy to the chest. If you have problems or concerns, depending on the cause, your doctor may prescribe a cough suppressant or other medication.



## How can I manage my skin during treatment?

### Moisturise twice a day

You will be recommended a skin moisturiser to use during treatment. At the start of treatment, apply cream to the area being treated (front and back) **TWICE A DAY**. As treatment progresses you may need to apply the cream three to four times per day. If changes to your skin occur in the treatment area, inform the nursing staff as you may need to use a different cream.

### Wear loose fitting clothing

Avoid wearing tight fitting clothing that could potentially rub or irritate the skin. You may find singlets or cotton 'crop-tops' more comfortable.

### Avoid excessive temperatures

Avoid exposure of the treatment area to excessive temperatures, such as: direct sunlight, heat packs, ice packs, electric blankets, saunas or hot spas.

### Wash with warm water and pat dry

You may wash the skin that is being treated with warm water and a mild non-perfumed soap. Pat the skin dry – do not rub.

*Do not use talcum powder in the treatment area.*

## Common questions

- **How will radiation therapy affect my daily living?**  
You may continue your usual work and activities but you may experience some tiredness near the end of your course of treatment and in the weeks following. Unless otherwise advised you may eat and drink normally, alcohol consumption in moderation is permitted and you can continue to take any prescribed medications.
- **Can I wash the marks off my skin?**  
We ask that you don't deliberately wash them off as this may further irritate your skin. The radiation therapists will re-apply them each day as required.
- **What happens after my treatment is finished?**  
Your follow up arrangements will be discussed and organised by your treating team prior to completing treatment.
- **When do the side effects settle?**  
The treatment keeps on working even though you have stopped coming in for treatment. Therefore the symptoms may get a little worse before they get better. Generally the side effects will have settled within two to four weeks of finishing your treatment course.





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