

Advice for Patients Receiving Radiation Treatment to the Breast/Chest Wall and Regional Lymph Nodes

Patient Information

Radiation Treatment Service

This information will help you and those close to you care for you during treatment. You may want to show this booklet to your support person so they also have an understanding of your treatment. We believe you should know what to look for, and how to encourage the healing process in your body.

It is common for patients receiving radiation treatment to the breast/chest wall to experience skin reactions, tiredness, and discomfort. These reactions build up slowly over the course of treatment. Your treatment team will help you manage these side effects. It is important to remember that all patients react differently to treatment. Do ask your treatment team if you have any questions, concerns or are experiencing problems. Write down any problems or questions you might have over this time and discuss these with your doctor or treatment team next time you see them.

What side effects can I expect?

Skin Reactions

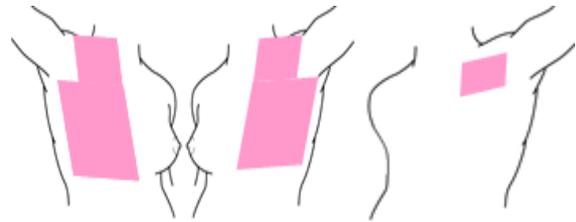
During your radiation treatment you are likely to have a skin reaction in the treatment area

Reactions may include:

- Skin becoming pink or red
- Skin becoming dry and flaky
- Skin feeling warm
- Skin feeling itchy
- Skin becoming sore and sensitive, especially the nipple
- Skin blistering, breaking, peeling or weeping. Particularly under the breast or in the underarm area.

These reactions are normal and the severity of the reaction differs from person to person.

Example of treatment area for breast and chest wall radiation treatment



How should I look after my skin?

There are two ways to care for your skin, Mepitel film dressings or moisturisers.

Mepitel film dressings

Mepitel is a silicon dressing which can be left in place for up to 14 days. It is used instead of moisturiser. The Safetac layer will stick to your skin, but will not damage your skin when it is removed. It acts as a barrier to help stop your clothes rubbing on your skin.

It does not prevent all treatment reactions but does decrease their severity. There may be some areas not covered by Mepitel film which the Radiation Therapists will advise you to put moisturiser cream on.

Mepitel film is not suitable for everyone. Please talk to your treatment team if you have any concerns about using it.

Caring for Mepitel film dressings

- Mepitel is shower proof but stays on better if water is not allowed to get behind the dressing
- Sweating, for example during exercise can decrease the length of time Mepitel film stays in place
- If you notice the Mepitel film is rolling up, take a pair of nail scissors and remove the bit that is rolled up. If you cannot reach the area then the treatment staff can do this for you.

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What happens if it comes off?

Your treatment team will decide if you need a patch or if you need the whole dressing replaced. This may be arranged for the next day. If your dressing is coming off more than once a week we may swap you onto moisturiser instead.

Treatment areas not covered with Mepitel

Please follow the general skincare advice for any areas being treated but not covered by Mepitel film. If you are unsure please ask the treatment team.

General Skincare Advice

Please do:

- Use a simple moisturiser such as Health E Fatty Cream, Aveno, Dove or Calendula Cream on the treated area. Do this twice a day. You can start this before your treatment begins
- Avoid being in the sun for long periods of time. If this is unavoidable please cover the area being treated. Do not use sunscreen until the area being treated has completely healed
- Use the soap or shower gel you are normally use. Use a soft towel and pat the skin dry rather than rubbing it
- Carry on using deodorant unless it is sore to do so or the staff advise you to stop
- Minimise friction in the area
- Use an electric shaver on your armpit if you need to shave. Wet shaving, using wax or hair removal creams could make your reaction worse.

What should I do once I get a treatment reaction on my skin?

- Skin becoming pink or red or dry and flaky – carry on with general skincare advice
- Skin feeling warm and itchy – avoid scratching or rubbing the treatment area as this may increase the reaction or cause the skin to break. Continue to moisturise the area. You can use a cold compress, fan or hair dryer on cool setting, or put your cream in the fridge. Please let your treatment team know as there are creams available to relieve the itching

- Skin blistering, breaking, peeling or weeping. Particularly under the breast or in the underarm area – if the skin breaks do not use deodorant or moisturiser. These may cause complications with infection. Let your treatment team know when you come in for treatment and they will be able to advise you on how to care for that area of skin.

What other side effects are there?

Tiredness

Some people feel tired towards the end of their treatment. This can be caused by a number of things - travelling to treatment each day, change in routine, anxiety about treatment, recent chemotherapy or hormone therapy, and the radiation treatment itself. Most people don't find the tiredness too difficult to manage. You may need a nap in the afternoon or to take time off work. If you are having difficulties sleeping let your treatment team know.

Discomfort

You may feel some discomfort because of your treatment. Your breast may swell and feel firmer. This is normal and is allowed for during the planning of treatment. It can be occasional sharp pains, a dull ache in the breast, or sensitivity to touch. You may also feel discomfort around your shoulders because of the position of your arms during treatment.

What else do I need to know about treatment?

Smoking

We strongly advise you to stop smoking as this can make the side effects of treatment worse. You may find this very difficult. Please speak to your treatment team about support available to help you stop smoking.

Contraception during and after Treatment

If you are a woman of childbearing age, it is important that you do not become pregnant during your treatment. Radiation treatment given during

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pregnancy can harm a developing baby. You will need to confirm that you are not pregnant before starting your treatment, and that you understand you should avoid becoming pregnant during treatment (this means you will need to use a reliable form of birth control if you are sexually active). You can ask your doctors for information about this.

Vitamins and Dietary supplements

Please talk to your doctor or treatment team if you are taking any vitamin or dietary supplements as some of them may not be suitable to be taken during treatment.

What happens after treatment?

After your treatment has finished the radiation keeps working in your body. This means that your skin reaction may carry on getting worse for up to 14 days after your treatment has finished. Your skin will usually return to normal about 6 weeks after treatment. Follow the advice in this information sheet until the reaction has subsided.

The skin in the treated area will always be more sensitive to the sun. Keep the area covered as much as possible and use a sunscreen SPF 30+.

What supports are available after Radiation Treatment?

Please ask a member of your treatment team if you would like a referral to any of these services:

Lymphoedema Services

Cancer Society

Cancer connect

Massage

Counselling (General / for relationship and sexual issues)

Social work

Support groups

Look Good Feel Better

Wigs / Breast Prosthesis

Fit for Life

Chaplains

Pacific Health

Whanau Care Service

Contact us

Radiation Treatment Department

Level 2

Wellington Blood & Cancer Centre

Wellington Regional Hospital

Phone: (04) 806 2000

Hours: 8am-4.30pm, Monday to Friday

Urgent After Hours Advice:

5 North Ward oncology nurses are available for urgent after hours advice related to your treatment. This is after 4.30 and on weekends.

Phone: (04) 806 0418