



# Radiation treatment for breast cancer

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This information brochure aims to help and support women, who have been diagnosed with breast cancer, during radiation treatment, to enable them to better understand and accept the physical changes that are affecting their body.

When a woman is diagnosed with breast cancer, she faces a difficult time due to the treatment itself and the consequences of it. The feeling of being less of a woman because of a drastic change in self-image can have a serious impact on a woman's quality of life.

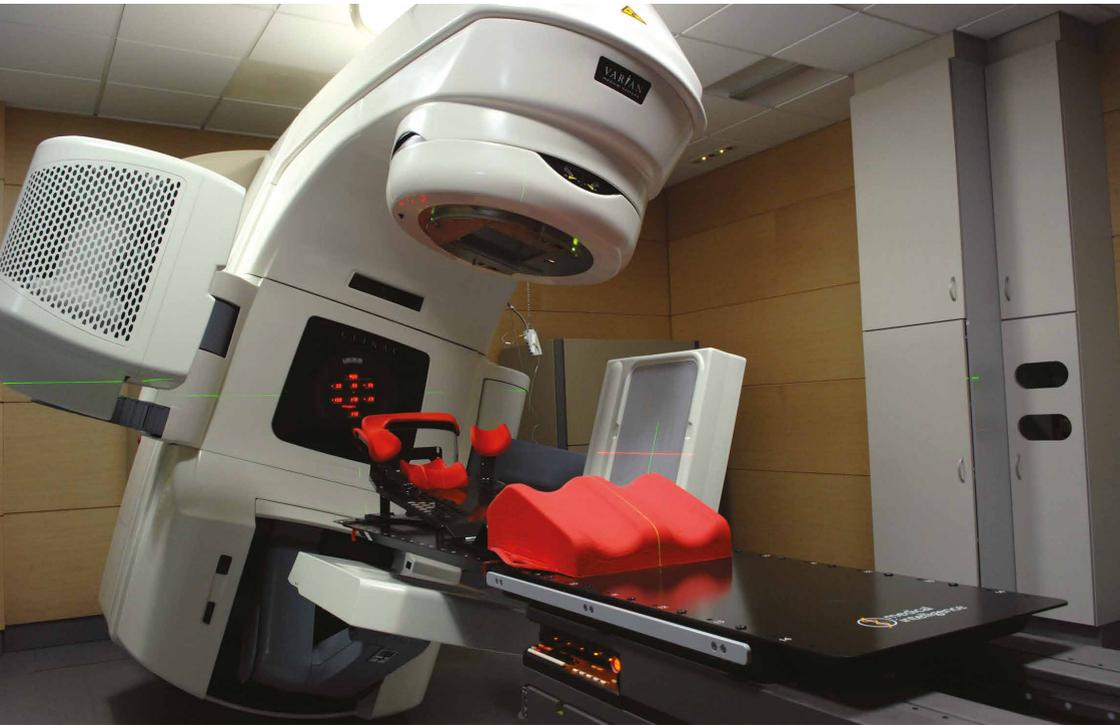
No doubt you will have questions or struggle with problems that are not covered in detail in this brochure; if so, please do not hesitate to contact the nursing staff or doctors. They will be happy to help and ensure that your treatment proceeds as seamlessly as possible.

We wish you a speedy recovery.

The Radiation Department Medical Team

## POTENTIAL PHYSICAL REACTIONS FOLLOWING RADIATION TREATMENT

Radiation only has an impact on the part of the body that is irradiated. Local side effects may occur depending on the location of the radiation treatment. Some people suffer a lot of side effects, others very few. The seriousness of potential side effects is not related to the results of the treatment: having no side effects does not mean that the radiotherapy is not having an impact. Any side effects during the radiation treatment and will heal completely once the treatment has been completed. This may take several weeks.



## SKIN

Externally applied radiation has to pass through the skin to reach the body part that needs to be irradiated.

Your skin may become drier and more sensitive as a result and the irradiated area may start to itch. The skin may remain flaky and discoloured until long after the treatment has been completed.

The intensity of the skin reaction depends upon a number of factors, i.e. the type of radiation, the applied dose, whether or not you are also having chemotherapy and the site of the radiation treatment will determine any changes in the skin. A small amount of radiation leaves the body again on the opposite side of where it entered the body, which means that your back and neck can also become discoloured. Any reaction of the skin can be painful, e.g. when touched by clothing.

Skin reactions tend to occur around the third week of the treatment and will gradually get worse thereafter. The skin usually becomes pale to dark red and sometimes sensitive areas may occur, possibly with blisters and small open wounds. In the worst case scenario the open wounds will develop into wet patches. They mainly occur in skin folds (folds in the neck, underarm, underneath the breasts, etc.) and may get worse, even after the radiation treatment has been completed.

The skin will start to heal again after the last radiation session. Minor skin reactions tend to heal from one to two weeks after the treatment. More severe skin reactions only start to heal two to four weeks after the treatment. Discolouration of the skin will generally start to fade after a few weeks, but this can take several months.

Always consult your doctor or nurse if your skin becomes dark red and/or is painful and/or develops a burning sensation, or if blisters start to form and the skin becomes wet and sticky. In the event of severe skin problems you can obtain additional advice from the wound care nurse (by appointment only). Any advice and care you will receive are free of charge; you will only be charged for any products that are used.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

These recommendations only apply to the areas of the body that have been irradiated. The rest of your body does not require this level of care.

### During radiation treatment

- ✗ Protect your skin from additional irritation, wounds and infection throughout the treatment and until the skin has completely healed.
- ✗ Apply a moisturising cream (Flamigel®). This type of cream can also be used if your skin is itchy or very dry. We recommend that the cream be applied to irradiated skin up to maximum twice a day from the first day of the radiation treatment.

- X Taking a shower is preferable to having a bath. If any of the markings disappear it is not advisable to try to reapply them yourself.
- X Use lukewarm rather than hot water when washing. Hot water tends to dry out the skin even more.
- X Choose a hydrating neutral pH type of soap (e.g. glycerine soap).
- X Carefully wash the breast area with a soft flannel, patting it gently rather than rubbing it.
- X Dry the skin carefully, again patting rather than rubbing and ensure that skin folds are properly dry.
- X Don't use a hot water bottle or electrically heated cushion.
- X Avoid using deodorants that contain alcohol.
- X Do not wax/shave your armpits during the radiation treatment.
- X Do not scratch or rub if you suffer from itchy or burning skin. A cold flannel or gel cushion that has been stored in the fridge can help. Wrap the cold gel cushion in a cover before placing it against the skin.
- X Avoid wearing scratchy or tight clothing. Don't wear a tight bra or corset if possible. If you do wear a bra insert a soft cloth to protect your skin. You could wear a cotton vest underneath your bra.

- ✗ It is advisable to wear cotton clothing if it comes into direct contact with irradiated skin.
- ✗ Protect your skin from direct sunlight. Sunscreens don't keep out the sun completely and can cause irritation.

### After the radiation treatment

#### The first few weeks after the treatment

- You should continue to observe the above mentioned recommendations until your skin has healed completely.
- Wait before acquiring a final set of dentures until your skin has healed completely . This will take four to six weeks.

#### Up to one year after the treatment

- Protect your skin from direct sunlight.
- Use a sunscreen with factor 30 or higher if your skin is exposed to the sun.

## DIFFICULTY SWALLOWING

When certain glands (e.g. those behind the sternum) are irradiated you may start to have difficulty swallowing after a while, due to the fact that part of the oesophagus will also be irradiated.

Difficulty swallowing usually starts around the second week of the radiation treatment. Once the treatment has finished the pain will soon reduce and disappear after a few days.

Always consult your doctor or nurse if you suddenly have more difficulty swallowing or you experience a burning sensation when swallowing.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

If you have difficulty swallowing you can take a mild painkiller (Dafalgan<sup>®</sup>, Perdolan<sup>®</sup>, etc.). You can also take a tablespoon of Syngel<sup>®</sup> (available on prescription from your doctor) before you eat to alleviate the pain locally.

## FATIGUE

Fatigue was underestimated for years in people diagnosed with cancer. Nowadays, fatigue is considered one of the most common side effects of the disease and its treatment.

The number of patients suffering from fatigue and its severity vary and depend upon the duration and type of treatment. Usually it relates to general fatigue, which might occasionally occur at the start of the treatment but becomes increasingly severe towards the end of the treatment. It may vary from mild tiredness to a feeling of complete exhaustion. These symptoms are usually due to the combination of different treatments you had to undergo, or to the fact that your body requires additional energy for your physical and psychological recovery. The main thing is to listen to your body and if necessary, have a break in the afternoon for example. Try to maintain your normal day to day routine where possible though.

## FLUID BUILD-UP IN THE CHEST (OEDEMA)

The radiation site may develop a degree of swelling, which is referred to as oedema. Usually the swelling is limited to a slightly swollen chest.

Chest oedema, similar to skin discoloration, is temporary. Consult your doctor or nurse if your arm becomes red, feels hot, swells considerably and is exceptionally painful. You should also contact the department if you develop a fever.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- ✗ If you wear a bra choose a loose fitting model.
- ✗ If you have been fitted with a temporary breast prosthesis make sure it has a soft feel and doesn't rub. A cotton vest underneath the prosthesis may provide additional protection for the skin.

## LYMPHOEDEMA IN THE ARM

Removal of the lymph glands from the armpit (axillary clearance) may slow down the flow of lymphatic fluid to your blood circulation on that side of the body. As a result this fluid may accumulate so that your arm will swell by a few centimetres, making the skin feel tight. This process is referred to as lymphoedema.

The lymphatic vessels and glands also play an important role in fighting infection. The removal of several glands will compromise this function to some extent. That is why any kind of wound, insect bite or small superficial infection can lead to an infection of the lymphatic vessels, resulting in swelling, red patches, a general feeling of malaise and fever.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- ✗ Avoid overexerting your arm.
- ✗ Avoid lifting heavy loads where possible. Avoid repeating the same movement time and again. You will soon find out for yourself what the maximum load is that your arm will support.
- ✗ Do not wear tight clothing or jewellery.
- ✗ Regular blood samples, drips and blood pressure measurements are not advisable on the arm in question.
- ✗ Avoid bathing in temperatures in excess of 38°C, taking a sauna, extremely cold and powerful water jets.

- ✗ Avoid scratches, be careful when cutting your nails, etc.
- ✗ Disinfect small wounds and notify your GP at the first sign of an infection.

Always consult your doctor or nurse if the arm in question has been injured, if it becomes red, feels hot, swells or is painful. You should also consult a doctor or nurse if you develop a fever and have difficulty moving your arm.

## COPING WITH THE TREATMENT

It is quite normal to feel emotional or even anxious and to sometimes have trouble coping with everything that's happening to you. Clear, detailed information about the treatment can make it easier to cope with the situation.

If you feel anxious, unsure or very emotional during or after the treatment, remember that there are quite a few people around you who care very much about you. Talk to your family, friends, etc. about how you feel. It will help them understand your emotions and make it easier for them to support you. You can also contact the department doctors and nursing staff at any time.

You, and those around you who are interested, are always welcome to join one of the tours that are organised at the radiation department every two weeks.

The departmental social worker is also available to discuss specific problems. You can make an appointment with her via the nursing staff.

Finally, you might be inclined to share your feelings with people who have had a similar experience. Further information on a self-help group in your area can be obtained via the social worker or cancer helpline, tel. 0800 35 445.



You can contact us during office hours on +32 16 34 76 00, both during and after your radiation treatment.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

This brochure is based on a combination of material gained from different information brochures and from practical experience.



The following is a list of some of the information brochures available from the department:

- ✗ Find out more about breast cancer
- ✗ Proactive Approach to Rehabilitation after breast cancer
- ✗ Fellow cancer patients
- ✗ Informative and interactive sessions for cancer patients and the people around them
- ✗ Website: [www.uzleuven.be/en/radiation-oncology](http://www.uzleuven.be/en/radiation-oncology)

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