

Breast or chest wall radiation side effects

Side effects may happen because the radiation used to kill cancer can also damage healthy cells in the area around the treatment site. Side effects differ from person to person, ranging from none to severe. Some side effects may not happen until 2 to 3 weeks after you start radiation. Most side effects go away within 2 months after treatment is done.



This handout lists the most common side effects from breast or chest wall radiation. It does not list all possible side effects.

Let your radiation doctor or nurse know if you have any side effects, whether mild or severe.

Skin changes

Your skin in your treatment area may look red, tan or darker for weeks or months. Dry, peeling skin is normal. Your breast and nipple may become swollen or tender. Other skin changes include itching, swelling, or puffiness.

The skin that was treated may be more sensitive to the sun and it may sunburn easier. If you see sores, blisters or moist areas on your skin, call your doctor or nurse to discuss options.

- **Avoid having your treatment area in the direct sun until all of your radiation treatments are done and your skin has fully healed. Talk about sun exposure with your doctor.**
- Protect your skin from the sun by using sun protective clothing or sitting under an umbrella. This is preferred over sunscreen.
- Be careful with sunscreen after treatment as it may cause irritation. When using sunscreen, use sunscreen with an SPF (sun protection factor) of 30 or higher.

- Be careful with skin creams and sunscreens with active ingredients like retinol or salicylic acid because they may bother your skin. Avoid aerosol sunscreens because they may sting or burn.
- Your team may give you a cooling disc to use during radiation. Don't put anything else on your skin that is very hot or cold, such as ice or heating pads, until your skin is fully healed.

Please talk to your radiation doctor about skin care recommendations for your personal case, as each patient's case may differ.

Ways to manage skin changes

- Avoid shaving armpit or treatment area
- Wash skin and any stickers/markings gently with lukewarm water and mild soap and pat dry. Don't use antibacterial soaps.
- Wear loose fitting clothing and bras without wires
- Don't put very hot or very cold items, such as heating pads or ice packs, on the treatment area

Fatigue

Fatigue is a common side effect that affects most people. Fatigue can be mild to severe. Some ways to manage fatigue:



Be active. Exercise is the best way to lessen fatigue. Ask your doctor if it's safe for you to exercise. Even 15 or 30 minutes of exercise a day, like walking or gentle stretching, can help give you more energy.



Try to get at least 8 hours of sleep each night. Avoid alcohol and high sugar foods in the evening and caffeine 6 to 8 hours before bed since they may keep you awake. Avoid cell phone and computer use late at night.



Eat and drink well. Try to eat 5 or 6 small meals and snacks rather than 3 large meals. Try to eat high protein foods and avoid foods and drinks with added sugars. Drink 6 to 8 cups of fluids each day, unless your

cancer care team tells you otherwise. If you need help with food and drink choices, you can ask to meet with a dietitian.



Let family and friends help. They can help with chores, rides, shopping and meals.

Hair loss

You may lose hair in the treatment area, including your chest and armpit.

To learn more

Ask your nurse for a copy of the book **Radiation and You** or scan the QR code to view it online. See page 21 for more details about common breast or chest radiation side effects.



Questions and concerns

Let your team know if you have any questions or concerns during your treatment.