

Radiation Therapy to the Breast

You are getting radiation to your breast as part of your cancer treatment. This factsheet is about side effects that could happen. It also tells you ways to manage the side effects.

Possible Side Effects

Skin changes. The effects of radiation on the skin depend on a number of things:

- Number of treatments
- Total radiation dose
- Overall health
- Sun exposure of the treated area before radiation therapy

Side effects to the skin occur only where the radiation enters and exits your body. If you aren't sure where these areas are, ask your cancer care team. Take care of your skin from the first day of radiation, before side effects happen.

These skin changes may happen after a week or two of radiation treatment:

- Gets dry or itchy
- Turns darker, pink, or red
- Becomes sore and tender
- Peels or gets blisters

Radiation skin changes happen slowly over time. They may last for a while after radiation treatments end. Most effects go away after 2–4 weeks.

Here are some tips to help protect your skin:

- Wash gently with warm water. Do not scrub. Use your hands, not a washcloth. Pat dry with a soft towel.
- Use a mild soap without perfumes or deodorants.
- Avoid rubbing on treated skin. Wear loose-fitting clothing. Cotton fabrics are the least irritating.
- Do not use adhesive bandages or tape in the treated area.
- Avoid temperature extremes. Do not use heating pads, hot water bottles, or ice packs on the treated area.
- Keep treated skin protected from the sun. Use sunscreen with at least SPF 30 when outdoors.

Wear a wide-brimmed hat and clothing with long sleeves and legs. Do not use tanning beds.

- Use only an electric razor if you shave the treated area.

These suggestions can help manage skin changes:

- Apply a moisturizing cream, lotion, gel, or oil to radiated skin. Don't use lotion right before your radiation treatments. Put it on at least 4 hours before.
- Refrigerate your lotion to help soothe and reduce the heat that you may feel.
- Choose products for sensitive skin. Avoid products with perfume or deodorant.
- If a product stings, stop using it.
- If your skin becomes tender or itchy, try using a 1% hydrocortisone cream from the drugstore.

Hair loss. After about two weeks, you will start to lose hair in the area that was treated. It will usually begin to grow back within 3–6 months after radiation treatment ends. Use only an electric razor if you shave within the treated area. Hair loss may be permanent, depending on the amount of radiation you get.

Swelling. You may have breast swelling after a few treatments. The swelling is harmless and usually painless. It may take several months after treatment ends to go away.

Sore throat and difficult swallowing. If the area treated is near the esophagus (the tube that passes food to the stomach), you may develop a sore throat and have trouble swallowing. You may feel like there is a lump in your throat. Soft foods, throat gargles, or certain medicines can help. Talk with your cancer care team if you have any concerns.

Fatigue. Feeling tired, or fatigue, is a common side effect of radiation treatments. Take good care of yourself while you are in treatment. If you feel very tired, you may need extra rest. Many patients find mild exercise such as walking can improve energy levels. Talk to your cancer care team before you begin exercise.

Side effects may go on after your last treatment. If you have concerns, please talk with your cancer care team.