

Information for Patients

# Radiotherapy Treatment for Breast Cancer



This is a guide to inform you about the radiotherapy treatment that you are going to receive. It also explains the possible side effects that you may experience and how they should be managed.

If you have any further questions, please contact the Radiotherapy Department at The Lingen Davies Centre on 01743 261179. Please leave a message on the answerphone with your hospital number and a contact telephone number.

Advice and information is also available from the Breast team including your Nurse Specialist; the Radiographers and Review Radiographer during your radiotherapy treatment; and, the Chemotherapy team (should you be having chemotherapy).

## Introduction

The aim of this leaflet is to provide information regarding radiotherapy treatment to the breast, including the process involved and the possible side effects.

Radiotherapy is the use of high-energy radiation beams to destroy tumour cells. It is an effective treatment for breast cancer, as it can significantly reduce the chance of the cancer returning.

Treatment is given daily, Monday to Friday, as an outpatient. It is unlikely to cause any side effects which would stop you from driving to and from the hospital for your appointments.

You will be asked to give consent for any treatment that you require. For more information, visit

[www.nhs.uk/conditions/consent-to-treatment](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/consent-to-treatment)

# CT Planning Scan

After your initial consultation, you will receive an appointment for a CT planning scan.

The pre-treatment team will explain the procedure; check that you understand the information given by your doctor; and, that you agree to go ahead with the treatment.

All patients of child bearing age will be asked to confirm if they are pregnant. It is important that you are not pregnant and do not become pregnant whilst undergoing radiotherapy planning and treatment.

It is important to keep hydrated by drinking lots of water or other fluids.

The CT planning scan is used to plan your radiotherapy treatment and is not used for diagnostic purposes. The process takes approximately 30 minutes to 1 hour.

The position you are in for the scan will be the same for your radiotherapy treatment. If you are uncomfortable or in pain maintaining the position, you must inform the CT radiographers straight away, so your position can be changed.

You will be given up to three permanent ink (tattoo) dots under the skin in the most suitable area of your body. These will be used to position you accurately for each day of your treatment.

You will be given your treatment start date, and time, following your CT planning scan. If you have any appointments that may clash with your radiotherapy treatment, please advise the Radiographers as we may be able to alter your appointment.

## Intravenous Contrast (Dye) Injection (IV contrast)

Your Consultant may ask us to perform the CT planning scan with IV contrast. A needle is inserted into the vein on the back of the hand with a small plastic tube known as a cannula. A contrast agent (dye) is then injected to make it easier to see the detail on the scans. If you need to have an IV contrast, you will need an up-to-date blood test, which can be carried out when you attend the group pre-assessment.

## Radiotherapy Treatment

On your first day of Radiotherapy, a member of staff will come and meet you from reception and show you to the treatment area. You will be informed of the process you are to undertake and will have an opportunity to ask any questions.

You will be asked to change into your dressing gown, or something similar, and wait in the patients' waiting room by the radiotherapy treatment machines (Linacs).

During later visits (after checking in at reception), please take a seat and wait for your name to be called. Once you are called, make your way around to the treatment area and change ready for your treatment.

Once in the treatment room you will be asked to remove your dressing gown and to get on to the treatment couch. You may like to wear a strappy vest and lower the straps once you are on the treatment bed.

The couch will rise up quite high and move under the Linac. There will be at least two Radiographers in the treatment room; one either side of you.

It is really important that you lie heavy and relax, as the Radiographers move you to line up your skin tattoos with the lasers that are in a fixed position in the room.

Once you have been aligned correctly, you may feel the treatment couch move. This is normal - it is the Radiographers carrying out the moves from the treatment plan.

The Linac will then move into the treatment position. The Linac will not touch you as it moves around.

X-ray images are taken regularly during your treatment to ensure you are in the correct position. You may hear a buzzing noise whilst these are taken. There will then be a delay whilst these images are checked by the Radiographers.

If the x-ray image confirms you are in the correct position, the Radiographers will deliver the treatment. You will not see or feel anything, but you will hear a buzzing noise.

If the x-ray images show that your position needs changing, you may feel the bed move slightly. The Radiographers can do this from the control room.

The Linac will then move and deliver the next part of the treatment. This sequence will continue until that day's treatment is complete.

It is really important to keep as still as possible, so the Radiographers can deliver the treatment as accurately as possible.

Once all the treatment has been given, a Radiographer will re-enter the room and let you know that you can move. You will be seen regularly by a Review Radiographer, who will assess your side effects and provide you with any information you may need.

You will be given the appointment time for the following week.

# Pregnancy and Radiotherapy

All patients of childbearing age (12-55 years old) will be asked to confirm that they are not pregnant before their CT scan and, possibly, before the first treatment of radiotherapy. You will be asked to sign a form to show that this question has been discussed.

If you are unsure or think you might be pregnant, you will be asked to take a pregnancy test. The procedure will not go ahead until a negative result has been confirmed.

It may seem insensitive to ask, but the law requires us to exclude this possibility before starting any procedure that uses radiation for treatment. These regulations are designed to protect the unborn child as radiation can seriously affect their growth and development.

It is very important that you are not, and do not become, pregnant whilst undergoing radiotherapy planning and treatment. If you think you may be pregnant at any time during your course of treatment please tell your Clinical Oncologist or Radiographer immediately.

## Side effects

Side effects may occur as the radiation beam will affect healthy cells along with any tumour cells. The side effects are produced as the body recovers its healthy cells and gets rid of the destroyed tumour cells.

The most common side effects occur during, or soon after, treatment. They are usually most noticeable around ten days after finishing the course of treatment, and may last for a few weeks. Side effects can hugely differ from person to person.

- **Skin Reaction** - in the treatment area, the skin may become itchy, dry or develop spots. As treatment continues your skin can feel sore and the colour may change. Sometimes, especially where two layers of skin rub together, the skin may break.

The skin in the treatment area will be more sensitive to sunlight and care should be taken to avoid exposure to the sun during treatment, and for a few months after. If the under arm is being treated, hair growth in this area will be reduced. This may last for some months.

- **Tiredness** - towards the end of your treatment course, you may feel more tired than usual. Ensuring that you have enough rest; drinking plenty of fluids (and reducing your intake of caffeine); and, eating a healthy balanced diet can help this.

Light moderate exercise will also help. You will be given an exercise sheet at the Pre-assessment meeting; if you would like any more information, please contact the 'Get Active Feel Good' Team on 07543827531.

- **Breast Symptoms** - your breast may become swollen and you may feel unusual sensations in this area, such as tightness, tenderness or, very occasionally, short sharp pains. If the symptoms worsen, please discuss this with the Radiographers who can advise on methods to reduce the discomfort.

These side effects usually settle within a few weeks or months of treatment completion. If any symptoms persist, or cause you concern, please contact your GP in the first instance.

## Possible long-term side effects

- **Skin Reaction** - the skin can feel different, drier, or may be darker than before. Red 'spidery' marks (known as telangectasia) may appear on the skin because small blood vessels have been damaged by the radiotherapy.

Your breast may feel tender and you may experience pain in your ribs. Swelling may also occur on your body (lymphoedema) because lymph nodes have been damaged. If this happens, inform your Doctor or Breast Care Nurse.

- **Tiredness** - the feeling of tiredness can last a few days or a few months. Make sure that you get enough rest and eat a balanced diet. Physical activity has been shown to help with cancer treatment related fatigue.
- **Emotional effects** - this is a time when you may be experiencing all kinds of emotions. It can be hard to cope once the treatment is finished, as it takes a while to recover from the treatment you have received.

The Hamar Centre offers support for you and your family or carers. The staff at the Centre can provide information, help and specific counselling to suit your individual needs.

Please feel free to discuss any concerns with your Oncologist or Treatment Radiographers. They can also provide you with further information about local and national support groups.

## General Skin Care during Radiotherapy

The effect of radiotherapy on the skin can be similar to sunburn (i.e. reddening and irritation). Your skin may darken; feel dry, tight or sore. A rash may appear; or, occasionally the skin may blister or peel.

The effects can be reduced by following a few simple steps:

- Minimise friction in the treatment area by wearing loose fitting, soft clothes made of natural fibres (e.g. Cotton).
- Gently wash, bathe or shower with soap and water and gently



pat dry with a soft, clean towel.

- Use aqueous cream instead of soap if wished. Please note aqueous cream is **not** recommended as a leave-on moisturiser.
- Use a moisturiser which is sodium lauryl sulphate free. Please ask a radiographer if you are unsure.
- Wash hair gently with your usual shampoo if the scalp is in the treatment area, but do not dry with a hair dryer.
- Avoid rubbing the skin; use of heat or cooling pads/ice; and, all hair removal products, including wax and shaving if possible.
- Expose the area being treated to air whenever possible.
- Avoid sticky tape in the area (Elastoplasts or Micropore).
- Avoid topical antibiotics unless there is a proven infection.
- Continue to use your normal deodorant, but stop if it irritates your skin or the skin is broken.
- Avoid spraying the treated area with products containing alcohol, such as body spray or perfume, aftershave or hair dyes.
- Protect the treatment area from exposure to strong sunlight or extremes of temperature (such as ice packs, hot water bottles, or cold winds).

A radiographer will assess your skin reaction daily, and will advise you accordingly.

## Follow-up appointments

Once your treatment has finished, you will have regular follow-up appointments so that your Oncologist can check your progress. This will involve a clinical examination; and, routine mammograms will be arranged by the Surgical Team.

Follow-up appointments may be based at the Lingen Davies Centre in Shrewsbury, or at Princess Royal Hospital in Telford. The frequency of these appointments will vary but appointments will become less frequent as time passes.

Follow-up appointments are a good opportunity to discuss any problems or worries you may have. It may help to make a list beforehand so that you don't forget anything important.

If you have any problems, or notice any new symptoms during these appointments, contact your GP or Breast Care Nurse as soon as possible. If required, your appointment to see your Surgeon or Oncologist can be brought forward.

Your GP will be sent a complete report about your treatment. Your Oncologist will discuss whether a further scan will be useful at your follow up appointment.

## After Treatment Skin Care

When you have completed your course of radiotherapy treatment, the skin reactions you may have experienced will continue for several weeks.

The reaction will peak approximately 7 to 10 days after you finish your course of radiotherapy, so please continue with the above skin care for, at least, a month.

It is important to protect your skin from the sun and strong winds for at least 12 months after treatment, and this area may always be more sensitive to sunlight.

Please use a high factor sun screen on the area that was treated if it is exposed to the sun. Sun creams aimed at children are particularly good as they are often high factor and designed for sensitive skin.

We recommend regular use of a moisturising cream in the future to prevent skin dryness.

You may swim provided the skin is not broken.

## Who to contact for more information

### **Radiotherapy Department**

Answerphone: 01743 261179

(8.30am to 6.00pm)

Please leave a message on the answerphone and we will get back to you.

### **Hamar Help and Support Centre**

Telephone: 01743 261035

(9.00am to 5.00pm)

### **Ward 23, Royal Shrewsbury Hospital**

Telephone: 01743 261423

### **Macmillan Information & Support Service**

Telephone: 0808 808 0000

Website: [www.macmillan.org.uk](http://www.macmillan.org.uk)

### **Living with and Beyond Cancer Team**

Telephone: 01743 262424

**We are a Dementia Friendly Department.** Please contact us directly on our answerphone (01743 261179) if you require additional help.

# Frequently Asked Questions

## **Q. What is Radiotherapy?**

**A.** Radiotherapy treats cancer using high energy x-ray beams to destroy cancer cells, whilst causing the minimum amount of damage to normal cells.

## **Q. Can I request a male/female Radiographer?**

**A.** Yes, you can request a chaperone or male/female Radiographer but this may delay treatment. Our friendly team of male and female Radiographers will be able to help and support you if you have any problems. A Review Radiographer will also see you regularly to assess your side effects and offer advice.

## **Q. When is the treatment given?**

**A.** You will receive the treatment on a daily basis (Monday to Friday) over a week or more, with rests at weekends. Treatment is usually given as an outpatient, which means you will not have to stay in hospital overnight.

## **Q. What will I feel?**

**A.** During your treatment you will not feel anything, or see anything. The actual treatment machine makes a buzzing noise, and the treatment lasts for only a few minutes at each visit. You can watch our short Radiotherapy for Breast Cancer Patient Information Film here:

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=D5bnWyeZi1I](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D5bnWyeZi1I)

## **Q. Will I experience any side effects?**

**A.** You may get some side effects towards the end of your course of treatment. You will be seen regularly by the Review Radiographer team during your treatment, and by the radiographers who will give you advice and support on a daily basis. A follow-up appointment will be given at the end of your course of radiotherapy.

**Q. Will I be radioactive?**

**A.** You will not be radioactive, and it is safe for you to be around other people and children.

**Q. How do I get to the hospital?**

**A.** Many patients drive themselves to the hospital for their treatment; and friends and family often like to help.

If you are unable to travel to the hospital because of medical reasons, the hospital can arrange transport for you.

**Q. Will I be told if the treatment is working?**

**A.** Treatment for cancer is different for everybody. Your doctor will discuss with you the best way to monitor your response to the treatment.

In some cases, the treatment is given to reduce the chance of the cancer coming back and there may not be a specific scan or test that will be helpful in measuring this. You can speak to your Clinical Nurse Specialist or Oncologist to discuss any concerns.



**Further information is available from:**



## **Feedback**

We appreciate and encourage feedback which can be shared in a number of ways through the hospital website. Scan the QR code to give feedback. <https://www.sath.nhs.uk/patients-visitors/feedback/>

## **Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)**

PALS will act on your behalf when handling patient and family concerns. They can also help you get support from other local or national agencies. PALS, is a confidential service.

Royal Shrewsbury Hospital, Tel: 0800 783 0057 or 01743 261691

Princess Royal Hospital, Tel: 01952 282888

## **Other Sources of Information**

### **NHS 111**

A fast and easy way to get the right help, whatever the time. NHS 111 is available 24 hours a day, 365 days of the year.

111 (free from a landline or mobile).

[www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)

### **Self Help and Support Groups**

A selection of websites providing access to good quality health information, local organisations and community groups is available from the library. [www.library.sath.nhs.uk/find/patients/](http://www.library.sath.nhs.uk/find/patients/)

### **Information in Other Languages or Formats**

If you require this information in a different way such as easy read, a different language, larger print, audio or braille please tell a member of staff or contact the Patient Experience Team;

sath.patientexperience@nhs.net or 01743 261000 ext.2503.

**Website:** [www.sath.nhs.uk](http://www.sath.nhs.uk)

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