

## What Is Radiation Therapy for Breast Cancer?

Radiation therapy is a treatment for cancer that uses high-energy x-rays to destroy cancer cells. (Radiation therapy is sometimes called irradiation or radiotherapy.) For these treatments, a machine called a *linear accelerator* is used to deliver high-energy x-rays to a specific part of your body, like the breast or chest wall. Usually, patients receive radiation therapy on a “come and go” basis. This means that you come and go from your home to the hospital each day to receive your treatments.

## What Can I Expect While at California Pacific Medical Center?

- You will meet with a physician specialist called a Radiation Oncologist. The Radiation Oncologist sees patients who may receive radiation therapy for the treatment of cancer. (This includes both patients who are referred by their doctor or self-referred to the Department of Radiation Oncology at California Pacific Medical Center.)
- The Radiation Oncologist will review your medical history with you, taking into consideration your prognosis, the side-effects related to treatment, and the benefits of radiation therapy. **Together, you will decide upon a treatment course based upon the recommendations you have discussed.**
- The staff will work closely with you to position you carefully during your radiation treatment. This will assure accurate treatment to your breast while minimizing the effects to surrounding areas such as lung, heart, or arm.
- We will place temporary ink lines and a few pinpoint permanent marks on your skin. Since these lines are marked on your skin with a durable ink-marking pen that can stain clothing, please dress accordingly.
- During radiation therapy to the breast, you may experience some mild to moderate side effects. **In general, side effects vary from one individual to another.** The staff will work closely with you to minimize these side effects. Be sure to let your doctor or nurse know if you are feeling any side effects.

## What Are Some of the Side Effects I Will Experience?

### Fatigue

Fatigue associated with radiation therapy to the breast or chest wall is usually mild. Many people feel fatigue toward the end of treatment. Fatigue may continue until the body recovers, sometime after you have finished your radiation therapy. Feeling fatigue means feeling tired all over or feeling sleepy. You may have difficulty concentrating or feel as if your legs are very heavy when you walk. Some common reasons for feeling fatigue include the daily trips to the medical center for treatment, your body's extra need for energy to help itself heal, how you feel before you start treatment, and whether you received chemotherapy.

#### Things you can do to help cope with fatigue include:

- Sleep 6-8 hours a day and take naps as needed.
- Take a daily 30-minute walk or exercise if your energy level allows.
- Pace your activities. Do the most important tasks during the time of day when you feel best.
- Drink at least 8 cups of hydrating fluids a day, such as water, dilute fruit juice, non-caffeinated soda.
- Eat a well-balanced diet (adequate calories and high in protein).
- Talk with others about how you are feeling: Join a support group, meet with friends, talk with your partner, spouse, or a close friend.

### Skin Reaction

You may experience some mild reddening of the skin, like a sunburn or tan, within the treatment area. A rash-like appearance of the skin is typical. This rash may become easily irritated or feel itchy. It is important not to scratch the skin, as it may cause the rash to spread and become worse. Also, you may notice a moist blistering of the skin, which can occur near the end of treatment. Skin reactions usually occur midway into your treatment course and usually heal within 4-6 weeks after treatment has been completed. Be sure to apply the lotion recommended by the staff to your skin at least 2 times a day. Gently apply the lotion to the entire treatment area, from underneath your arm to the breast bone. **NOTE: Please do not apply lotion to the treatment area 2 hours before you are scheduled for treatment.**

Radiation therapy to the breast will cause hair loss in the area within the treatment field, such as the underarm. Be sure to discuss any skin changes you may have with your doctor and nurse. Together, they will monitor your skin carefully and can advise you if additional treatment is needed.

## What Are Some of the Side Effects I Will Experience?

*(continued)*

### Here are some things you can do for your skin:

- You may wash with a mild soap and warm water. Do not scrub. To dry your skin, pat dry. **Be gentle with your skin in the treatment area.** Also, you may use the cold cycle of a hair dryer to dry your skin before applying the lotion.
- Gently apply the lotion to your skin at least twice a day.
- Wear loose-fitting clothes over the treatment area. Try wearing a loose bra, cotton T-shirt, or wearing a cotton T-shirt under your bra.
- Avoid wearing a prosthesis during treatment, as it may irritate your skin.
- Do not use under-wire bras or any clothing that would scratch or irritate the breast or chest wall.
- Use only an electric razor if the skin under your arm is included in the treatment area.
- Avoid using deodorants that contain metal or aluminum. Use a natural deodorant to absorb odors.

### Breast Changes/Swelling

You may notice some swelling of your breast after a few treatments. Also, you may notice gradual swelling in the affected arm. Usually, this is due to accumulated fluid within the breast tissues and may take some months to disappear. Sometimes you may feel some mild discomfort associated with the swelling. Be sure to let your doctor or nurse know if you experience any swelling. Range-of-motion exercises are encouraged. It is important to continue your arm stretching exercises to maintain the flexibility of your arm. **Avoid heavy lifting and trauma to the affected arm.**

### Sore Throat/Difficulty Swallowing

Sometimes, patients receiving radiation therapy to the neck area may have a sore throat after several weeks of treatment. This may persist for as long as 1-2 weeks following completion of your therapy.

### Nutrition

**Eating a well-balanced diet helps maintain your strength and energy, helps your body to recover, and prevents weight loss. Maintaining your weight is recommended.** Be sure to eat small, frequent meals. Eat a diet with adequate calories, and high protein foods. Eat a diet rich in fruits and vegetables. And, if you are having difficulty maintaining your weight, please ask your nurse for suggestions.

## What Are Some of the Side Effects I Will Experience?

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### Sexuality

The most common side effect of radiation therapy to the breast is a change in your body self-image. You may feel a lack of confidence in the way you look and in feeling attractive. You may feel more of a need to be held and comforted during this time. It is very important that you communicate your feelings. However, you may have difficulty talking about these feelings openly. If you are having difficulty, please ask your doctor or nurse who are available to offer additional information and support to you at any time during your treatment.

### Breast Self-Examinations

Performing breast self-examinations are an important part of your ongoing care. Your doctor and nurse can assist you in learning to examine your breasts. It is strongly recommended that you become familiar with doing breast self-examinations during the course of treatment, as you may notice changes in how your breasts feel after surgery or while you are receiving radiation therapy.

## More Ways to Learn

### Emotional Support:

- Confidential and affordable mental health consultations are available with a licensed therapist to help you manage lifestyle changes, treatment related side effects, and anxiety. Call Kristine Ashe, PhD at (415) 600-3726 for more information.
- Join a free, weekly breast cancer support group at the Breast Health Center. Call (415) 600-6420.

### Education Information and Consultation Sessions:

- The Women's Health Resource Center offers free Make-Overs for Women with Cancer. Call (415) 600-0500 for more information.
- Read the Krame's booklet [Understanding Breast Cancer](#). Your nurse can provide this book for you upon request.
- Have a free, 90-minute education consultation with a nurse specialist, Breast Cancer Recovery Program. Topics include lymphedema, sexuality, menopause, and breast self-exam (BSE). Call (415) 600-6420 to schedule an appointment.
- Arrange for a Personalized Health Research Packet at the Institute for Health & Healing. Call (415) 600-3681 to learn more about this education service.

## More Ways to Learn *(continued)*

- Go to [www.cpmc.org/services/women/breast/bse.pdf](http://www.cpmc.org/services/women/breast/bse.pdf) and print out the brochure on BSE.

### Continuing Medical Care:

- The Department of Rehabilitation offers a service for Lymphedema Therapy: Physician referral is required. Call (415) 600-3395 for more information.

### Frequently Asked Questions

**Question: What is Radiation Therapy for breast cancer?**

Answer: Radiation therapy for breast cancer is a treatment that uses high energy x-rays to destroy cancer cells.

**Question: Will I be able to enjoy my regular activities during treatment?**

Answer: Yes, but you may experience mild to moderate side effects from the treatment, including fatigue.

**Question: Will I experience many side effects?**

Answer: Side effects vary from person to person. Please talk with your doctor or nurse if you are experiencing any side effects from the treatment.

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Note: This information is not meant to replace any information or personal medical advice which you get directly from your doctor(s). If you have any questions about this information, such as the risks or benefits of the treatment listed, please ask your doctor(s).