

# Radiotherapy to the breast

## Why you have been recommended to have radiotherapy?

Radiotherapy uses high-energy x-rays to destroy any cancer cells that might be remaining after surgery. Although normal cells can also be damaged by radiotherapy, they can usually repair themselves. Radiotherapy thus substantially decreases the risk of breast cancer coming back in the breast or chest area.

**If you think that there is a chance you may be pregnant, or have missed a period, please tell the radiographers before your radiotherapy planning appointment as radiation can be harmful to the unborn child.**

## Your treatment appointments

- You may be treated by male or female radiographers.
- A radiographer will explain the treatment to you and discuss possible side effects with you.
- **You will have the opportunity to ask questions at this point.**
- You will be shown to the changing room and asked to remove your top clothes and put on a gown.
- You will then be taken into the treatment room.
- The radiographers will position you on the treatment couch. The room lights will be dimmed, a light and green laser lights will be shone on your skin to line up the treatment area with the machine.
- The radiographers will leave the room to begin the treatment.

- **Should you need assistance they will be watching you on TV screens throughout your treatment.**
- Treatment to the breast is given from two different angles or three if the neck area needs to be treated. These are checked daily prior to treatment.
- When the machine is on it makes a buzzing sound, but the treatment is painless.
- On your first day x-ray images are also taken which can make the procedure slightly longer. These images are repeated on days two, three and weekly.

### Short term side effects

**Most patients tolerate breast radiotherapy extremely well. Most side effects are temporary and do not affect all patients.**

They generally develop during the second half of a course of treatment and continue for up to four to six weeks after treatment has finished.

- **Tiredness**
- **Sore skin** in the treatment area
- **Sore ribs** on the treatment side
- **Swollen and tender breast** for a few weeks
- **Very occasionally nausea**

### Long term side effects

It is possible for some side effects to occur months or even years after the treatment has finished. They happen only in a small number of cases. Your doctor will discuss these with you before you start. Overall, the benefit of radiotherapy in substantially reducing the risk of a recurrence of cancer very greatly outweighs the extremely low risk of more serious late effects.

- Lymphoedema (this is a swelling of the arm, breast and/ or chest wall on the affected side)
- Shrinkage/hardening of the breast.
- Skin discolouration in the area treated by radiotherapy.

- Radiotherapy to the breast or chest wall does treat a very small amount of lung tissue, just underneath the treatment area. We take care to minimise the amount of lung treated, and it is extremely rare for this to cause any symptoms at all.
- Radiotherapy given to the left side can cause scarring to the heart, some years after treatment. We take great care to avoid irradiating the heart and, with modern techniques, the risk of later damage is now very low indeed.
- In those patients receiving radiotherapy to the lymph nodes, there is a very small risk of developing late side effects such as nerve pain, tingling and weakness or numbness to the arm/ hand.
- Extremely rarely, radiotherapy can cause damage to the ribs, with a risk of rib fracture.
- Another extremely rare possibility is causing another cancer to develop many years after treatment

### Looking after yourself during and after your Radiotherapy

- **Do** continue washing/bathing as normal.
  - **Do** be gentle with your skin, pat dry.
  - **Do** avoid extremes of temperature such as heating and cooling pads.
  - **Do** keep the treatment area out of direct sunlight.
  - **Do** increase your fluid intake – ideally two litres of water a day, minimise alcohol consumption.
- Do** wear a non-underwired, well-fitting cotton bra to keep your breast supported.
- **Do** feel free to discuss any worries with the radiographers.
  - **Do** read our 'Managing your Radiotherapy skin reaction' leaflet

**Smoking** can make your skin reaction worse – if you need help to stop please ask for advice.



## Radiotherapy department contact details

Telephone: 01225 824853

Monday-Friday 8am-3:30pm

Website: [www.ruh.nhs.uk/patients/services/radiotherapy](http://www.ruh.nhs.uk/patients/services/radiotherapy)

## Other useful phone numbers/websites

Bath RUH cancer information centre: (01225) 82 4049

Macmillan: [www.macmillan.org.uk](http://www.macmillan.org.uk)  
08088 080000

## Breast Unit RUH

Irene Buckley, Cherry Miller, Kate Hope): (01225) 82 4057

**Life after cancer** PocketMedic® have produced some patient information videos, available at [www.medic.video/swe15-cancer](http://www.medic.video/swe15-cancer) (Life after cancer)

Royal United Hospitals Bath NHS Foundation Trust  
Combe Park, Bath BA1 3NG  
01225 428331 [www.ruh.nhs.uk](http://www.ruh.nhs.uk)

Please contact the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) if you require this leaflet in a different format, or would like to feedback your experience of the hospital. Email [ruh-tr.PatientAdviceandLiaisonService@nhs.net](mailto:ruh-tr.PatientAdviceandLiaisonService@nhs.net) or telephone 01225 825656.