

# Radiation Therapy — Coping With Side Effects

## Did you know?

Radiation therapy may involve several side effects, but there are things you can do to relieve these side effects.

### **Skin irritation and redness in the treatment area**

This side effect is similar to a sunburn, causing the skin to peel, itch and feel dry. This will gradually go away once your treatment is over. In the meantime, treat your skin like you would if you had a sunburn — wear loose, soft clothing over the treated area and use lukewarm water for bathing. Not all lotions and sunscreens can be used during treatment, so check with your doctor before using any on the treated skin. Cover up when you are outside and use a sunscreen of SPF 15 or greater. Wearing a soft cotton bra without an underwire may also help.

### **Breast changes or swelling**

Your breast may become sore on a long term basis. You may help relieve some of the discomfort by wearing loose cotton clothing and not wearing a bra. You may notice that the treated breast has become firmer than the other. Swelling and soreness will gradually lessen once treatment is over, but it may take as long as a year.

### **Fatigue**

You may feel very tired during treatment. Your body is using a lot of energy to heal itself. Try to get as much sleep as possible. If you can, adjust your work schedule or activities to give you more time to rest. Aerobic exercise may help increase your energy and stamina.

## Others can help you cope

Radiation therapy does have some side effects, and they vary from person to person. There may be physical side effects to radiation therapy (described below), but there can be emotional issues to deal with as well. Remember, you do not have to go through this alone. You have co-survivors (family and friends) who can help you cope with both types of side effects. Always let your doctor or nurse know if you are having any problems with your treatment. They can help.

### **Dry cough or difficulty swallowing**

This is most likely to occur if the lymph nodes in the neck or near the breast bone are also being treated. Eating cold, soft foods like gelatin or ice cream can help ease your throat discomfort.

### **Lymphedema (swelling of the hand or arm)**

Lymphedema can occur after radiation therapy if the lymph nodes were treated. To reduce your risk of lymphedema, avoid injections or blood pressure checks in the affected arm. Avoid heavy lifting or carrying. Ask your doctor for information about lymphedema and refer to the *Lymphedema* fact sheet.

## How are you feeling?

After a diagnosis of breast cancer, many women feel a variety of emotions, from anger to sadness to fear. Side effects from radiation therapy may magnify existing emotions. Some women also have new feelings of nervousness or fear of radiation or the machine that delivers it. Many women find it helpful to talk to others who have gone through radiation therapy and to hear about their experiences. You may feel more comfortable knowing

that others before you have had the same concerns and feelings you are having. A support group is a good place to start. Before your radiation treatment begins, you may want to ask to see the machine that will be used in the treatment. The radiation therapist will show you how it works and tell you what to expect before, during and after the treatment. This may help ease your anxiety and help you stay relaxed during the radiation therapy.

## A doctor's advice

### Question:

I've just started my fourth week of radiation treatment. I'm so tired! What can I do?

### Answer:

Fatigue or tiredness is very common, especially in the later weeks of treatment. Your body is using a lot of energy to heal itself. The stress of having daily treatments also adds to your fatigue. If possible, try to get more sleep at night and take a nap during the day. You may also have to adjust your daily schedule to give you more time to rest. For some women, aerobic exercise such as walking on a daily basis seems to help. Make sure you eat — even when you are tired. Ask your family or friends to help out — many will be more than willing to lend a hand. Over time, you should gradually start to feel like yourself again.

## Resources

### Organizations

National Cancer Institute

1-800-4-CANCER, [www.cancer.gov](http://www.cancer.gov)

National Lymphedema Network

1-800-541-3259, [www.lymphnet.org](http://www.lymphnet.org)

## Questions to ask your doctor

Why do I need radiation therapy?

What are the main benefits for a person with my type of breast cancer?

What are the risks and side effects?

What can I do to manage the side effects?

How will the radiation be given?

When will my treatment begin? When will it end?

How will I feel during treatment?

Can I continue my normal activities?

How will my breast look afterward?

What should I expect when my treatment is over?

What follow-up care can I expect?

Will it change the look of my reconstructed breast?

### Related fact sheets in this series:

- Getting the Support You Need
- Lymphedema
- Making Treatment Decisions
- Radiation Therapy