

Kent Oncology Centre
**Radiotherapy Side Effects and
Management: Breast and Chest Wall**
Information for patients

We hope this leaflet will help you understand the side effects that may occur when having external radiotherapy to the breast and chest wall. It also explains the best management of these side effects. If you would like to speak to one of the radiotherapy team please feel free to contact them on the numbers given below:

Maidstone Hospital

Macmillan Radiotherapy Specialists ☎ 01622 225094

☎ 07703 972969

Appointment enquiries ☎ 01622 225080

Kent & Canterbury Hospital

Macmillan Radiotherapy Specialists ☎ 01227 864311

Appointment enquiries ☎ 01227 783010

You will be given a copy of our leaflet 'External Beam Radiotherapy' which we advise you to read alongside this leaflet. Our leaflets can also be found on the **Kent Oncology Centre website**: www.kentoncologycentre.nhs.uk.

You will also be able to view a short film showing breast radiotherapy on the website or search www.youtube.com for 'Kent Oncology'.

Side effects from external radiotherapy to the breast and chest wall

Some side effects may occur, usually towards the end of the course of treatment and also during the first few weeks after treatment has finished. Treatments given over several weeks give more side effects than a short course of treatment.

These side effects can be upsetting and may require you to make some adjustments to your normal life, but most are temporary and will gradually disappear after a few weeks. However, some side effects may continue for, and some may only become apparent after, months or years following treatment. It is important to discuss these with your specialist consultant as help may be available.

Your treatment plan may include **radiotherapy to the supraclavicular fossa** (the area above the breast). The following information will be relevant but there are some additional side effects that are explained in this leaflet. Radiotherapy does not make you radioactive; it is safe to be with other people, including children, throughout your treatment.

Pregnant?

Please tell the medical staff if you might be pregnant; radiotherapy can harm the developing baby.

Short term side effects

You will be monitored throughout your treatment by the radiotherapy team. Please let them know if you experience any of the following problems:

Tiredness

You may feel very tired during or after your treatment. This is very common and can be worse if you have also had surgery or chemotherapy. This tiredness may affect what you feel able to do. The journey to hospital can be tiring in itself. However, many people find they can manage their daily tasks as usual and some continue to work full time.

Skin changes

You may notice some redness (like sunburn), increased pigmentation (darkening), and tenderness or itching of the skin in the treatment area. Your skin may peel or flake as treatment continues and this may result in a sore and weepy skin reaction.

Your skin reaction can be affected by the dose and type of treatment that your consultant has prescribed. It can also be dependent on your type of skin, your shape, any existing conditions such as diabetes and especially if you smoke. Advice can be provided to help you stop smoking.

Tips for helping your skin include:

- Wash the skin gently using soap or aqueous cream and gently pat dry.
- To reduce irritation to the treatment area you may use a moisturiser sparingly. Your Macmillan radiographer can advise on this.
- Continue to use your normal deodorant unless this irritates the skin or the skin is broken.
- Wear loose fitting natural fibre clothing next to the skin. You may prefer not to wear a bra.
- Avoid heating and cooling pads/ice.
- Avoid hair removal products.
- Avoid adhesive tape.
- Ensure the treated skin is covered when out in the sun. Your skin may be more sensitive to the sun especially in your first year after treatment; it is advisable to apply a high factor sun screen.

After finishing treatment you may be aware of your skin reaction becoming worse for up to another two weeks. Continue with the suggested skin care tips, returning gradually to your usual skin care regime when your skin has returned to normal. The healing process can be slower for some people, particularly those who have experienced a severe reaction.

You will be advised how to manage your skin if it blisters and breaks down, using special dressings if appropriate. If you have already finished radiotherapy when this happens please contact the Macmillan radiographer by telephone for advice.

Swelling (oedema) of the breast

During treatment you may notice that your breast or chest area appears swollen and feels uncomfortable. This usually settles within a few weeks after treatment.

Pain in the breast area

Occasionally you may have aches, twinges or sharp pains in the breast area, particularly in the area of the scar. Although these are usually mild, they can continue for some time after treatment is finished. In some cases they can last for months or even years, but they usually become milder and less frequent over time. Gentle exercise may help; you will be given advice and information by the physiotherapists.

Lymphoedema

This is swelling caused by a build-up of lymph fluid in the tissues. This can occur as a result of damage to the lymph system after surgery or radiotherapy to the lymph nodes in the armpit. The arm, on the side where radiotherapy or surgery was performed, swells and feels uncomfortable and heavy.

This is a long-term condition; while it can be controlled with appropriate treatment, it will never completely go away. More information is available if required, please ask your radiotherapy team or breast care nurse.

Change in breast shape, size and colour

If you have had radiotherapy after breast-conserving surgery, the breast tissue on the treated side may be firmer, smaller and look slightly different from before. This is due to fibrosis (scarring) of the tissues - this is normal and nothing to worry about. Cosmetic surgery may be an option. If you are concerned about this please speak to a member of the team or to your surgeon.

Hair loss in the armpit or chest area

Radiotherapy to the armpit will make the underarm hair fall out on that side. Men may also experience hair loss in the area of the chest that is being treated. This may be permanent.

Dry cough and shortness of breath

Temporary inflammation of the lung behind the breast may cause a short term cough or breathlessness; this usually settles without the need for any treatment.

Dry / sore throat

Radiotherapy to the area above the breast can cause a dry or sore throat for a short time. If you struggle to eat much, it is a good idea to supplement or replace your meals with nutritious high-calorie drinks, which can be supplied by our dietitian or are available on prescription.

Late side effects

The following side effects, if experienced, will be permanent. However, please bear in mind that your consultant recommended your radiotherapy treatment plan as the benefits far outweigh the potential side effects.

- Hardening of the underlying tissue in the treatment area. This is known as fibrosis.
 - Under the skin you may see tiny broken blood vessels, known as telangiectasia.
 - Sometimes after treatment to the breast/chest wall, part of the lung behind the treatment area can become inflamed, causing a dry cough or shortness of breath.
 - Very rarely the heart can be affected in people whose treatment is on the left side.
 - Radiotherapy to the area above the breast may cause damage to the nerves in the arm, resulting in tingling, numbness, pain, weakness and possibly some loss of movement.
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Further information and advice can be obtained from:

Kent Oncology Macmillan Cancer Information Centre, Maidstone Hospital

Offers support and information to anyone who has concerns about cancer (patients, relatives, friends or carers).

☎ 01622 227064

Macmillan Cancer Support

Provide practical, medical and financial information

☎ 0808 808 0000 (free phone)

Website: www.macmillan.org.uk

NHS Choices for cancer information prescriptions

Website: www.nhs.uk/ipg

Cancer Research

This charity provides information about cancer, treatment and clinical trials.

☎ 0808 800 4040

Website: www.cancerresearchuk.org

Patient Experience Teams (PALS) for East Kent patients

Kent and Canterbury Hospital

Desk at the outpatient's entrance of the hospital

Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother Hospital

Office at the main entrance of the hospital (Ramsgate Road)

William Harvey Hospital

Desk at the main entrance of the hospital

☎ 01227 783145 or 01227 864314

E mail: ekh-tr.patientexperienceteam@nhs.net

Please use this space to write any notes or questions you may have.

*The information in this leaflet has been taken from information provided by Breast Cancer Care Organisation.

MTW NHS Trust is committed to making its patient information accessible in a range of languages and formats. If you need this leaflet in another language or format please ask one of your clinical care team or the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS). We will do our best to arrange this.

Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells NHS Trust welcomes all forms of feedback from our service users. If the standard of service you have received from the Trust does not meet your expectations, we want to hear from you. Please speak with the ward manager or the nurse in charge in the first instance, or you can contact the **Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)** on:

Telephone: ☎ 01622 224960 or ☎ 01892 632953

Email: mtw-tr.palsoffice@nhs.net

or visit their office at either Maidstone or Tunbridge Wells Hospital between 9.00am and 5.00pm, Monday to Friday.

You can be confident that your care will not be affected by highlighting any areas of concern or making a complaint. The Trust will retain a record of your contact, which is held separately to any medical records. If you are acting on behalf of a patient, we may need to obtain the patient's consent in order to protect patient confidentiality. More information on PALS or making a complaint can be found on the Trust's website: www.mtw.nhs.uk or pick up a leaflet from main reception.

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