Radiotherapy

This factsheet describes radiotherapy, which is a treatment that patients with breast cancer may be offered. In this factsheet we aim to give information that will help you and your family and friends regarding radiotherapy treatment. We hope this will help you discuss your radiotherapy treatment with the doctors, nurses and radiation therapists. It is important to understand that there may be some differences between radiotherapy centres. Remember not to compare treatments with other patients, as each person’s treatments are individually planned.

WHAT IS RADIOTHERAPY?

Radiotherapy is the use of high energy X-rays to treat cancer. These high-energy rays are produced by a machine called a linear accelerator and are able to damage and destroy cancer cells within the treatment area. Radiotherapy also affects normal cells in the area being treated, but they are generally better able to recover than cancer cells. Treatments are usually given regularly over a period of time to have the greatest effect on the cancer cells while limiting the damage to normal cells.

WHEN IS RADIOTHERAPY GIVEN?

It is important to remember that patients’ treatment plans vary. In most cases it is given after surgery to reduce the risk of cancer coming back by getting rid of any possible remaining cancer cells in the area. If you have a lump removed, you will most likely receive radiotherapy to the remaining breast tissue. If you have a mastectomy (removal of the whole breast) you may receive radiotherapy to the chest wall area if the tumour was large or cancer cells had spread to lymph nodes under the arm.

If you are to have chemotherapy, a decision will be made as to when radiotherapy will be given. Radiotherapy may be given before, during or after...
Radiotherapy is a specialised treatment and so is not available in every hospital. However, each breast unit will have a link with a hospital that has a radiotherapy department. You will usually be treated as an outpatient. If you think you will have problems attending appointments, tell the radiotherapy staff. Sometimes transport can be arranged. It is important that treatment continues as planned and that you do not miss any appointments. If, for example, you have a holiday booked, tell the specialist or radiographer who is treating you so that arrangements can be made for it, if possible.

The staff treating you will check how you are each day, but if you have any problems tell the radiation therapist or nurse. An appointment can then be arranged with your specialist and/or breast care nurse if necessary. You are not a “radiation risk” to others around you. Close physical contact with others is fine during radiotherapy treatment and many people continue to work during their treatment.

WHAT ABOUT TREATMENT ARRANGEMENTS?

Timing of treatment will depend on each person’s situation, and other treatments may be given first. It will usually be given daily, Monday to Friday, for between 5 to 6 weeks.

First you will see the radiotherapy specialist (radiation oncologist) in the outpatient department to talk about your treatment. A further appointment will be made to plan the treatment, and you will then be given a starting date.
A CT scanner also uses x-rays to produce images of the body, it takes less time than the simulator.

You are also advised to have enough arm movement after your operation to allow you to raise your elbow to at least shoulder level so that you are comfortable in your treatment position. If you find this difficult ask to see a physiotherapist before starting treatment. If you are on pain medication take your painkillers before you go to your appointment.

The area to be treated may be marked with a pink/purple marker or permanent tattoos. If a marker is used you are advised not to rub it off before starting treatment and to return to the radiotherapy centre for top up markings if they fade. If skin tattoos are used they are very small blue/black in colour, and will remain on this area for life. These are not painful and are barely noticeable.

HOW IS RADIOThERAPY GIVEN?

When you go for treatment you will be asked to undress to the waist and lie on the treatment bed. The radiation therapist will position you so that you are in the same position each time you have treatment. Again you will be in the room alone but can be seen and heard in the outside room by the radiation therapist at all times, and you can speak to the staff through an intercom. When you are in the correct position you will be asked to stay very still and breathe normally. The radiation therapist will position the machine to different angles to aim the treatment to the areas required. You will not feel any pain while treatment is been given but you may feel some discomfort in your arm from keeping it in the same position during treatment. The treatment only takes a few minutes after which you will be asked to get dressed and will be given an appointment for the next day. This will be the routine until treatment finishes.

WHAT ARE THE SIDE EFFECTS OF TREATMENT?

Side effects happen because radiotherapy affects normal cells as well as cancer cells. Normal cells are able to recover but they may be damaged in the short or long term by the effects of radiation. Most side effects are temporary, but some may be permanent. Some side effects may even occur months or years after treatment. Each person reacts differently to treatment but certain side effects are more common than others.

COMMON SIDE EFFECTS

You may develop a skin reaction during or after treatment to the breast. The extent of this reaction depends on a number of factors including the dose of treatment given and the sensitivity of your skin. Skin reactions may be present with tenderness and itching of the skin in treatment area 10-14 days after treatment begins. There may be some flaking of the skin as treatment goes on and the skin may become red, sore and weepy. Each person’s skin reacts differently so while one person’s skin may react and become sore another person’s skin will remain intact. Your skin will be checked frequently by your healthcare team and suitable treatment will be given for the reaction.

Now and then you may have some aches, pains, twinges and swelling in the breast area while you are on treatment. These symptoms may continue for some time after treatment is finished.

If treatment includes the centre or collarbone area, a small area of your gullet may be affected. This may cause some heartburn and discomfort but it can usually be relieved with medication.

Your body does use a lot of energy over the weeks of treatment so you may feel more tired than usual especially as treatment goes on. The stress of a cancer diagnosis, and the journey to hospital may all add to this tiredness. Research would suggest that a balance between exercise and rest might help with this feeling of
fatigue. A healthy diet and fresh air may also be helpful.

For more information please contact National Breast Cancer Helpline on freephone 1800 30 90 40 and ask for our booklet on ‘Coping with Fatigue’.

LESS COMMON SIDE EFFECTS

These side effects would not appear until treatment was finished. Radiotherapy to the breast and armpit may cause hardening of the tissues. This is known as fibrosis and is caused by a build up of scar tissue.

Sometimes part of the lung behind the treatment area may become inflamed causing a dry cough or shortness of breath. This usually heals by itself.

RARE SIDE EFFECTS

There are some rare side effects, some of which can be serious and permanent.

If the fibrosis of the breast becomes severe, the breast may become noticeably smaller and harder. You may notice tiny dilated blood vessels under the skin. This is known as telangectasia. Severe fibrosis can also block lymph drainage of the arm and cause a swelling in the arm called lymphoedema.

Fibrosis of the upper lung can cause side effects such as dry cough or shortness of breath.

Other side effects that can occur later include:

- weakness of the bones in the area, for example, the ribs and collar bone
- damage to nerves in the arm, which may cause tingling, numbness, pain, weakness and possibly some loss of movement.

It is important to remember that serious side effects are rare and the experts agree that the benefits of the treatment outweigh the risks of these possible side effects.

HOW TO TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF DURING TREATMENT

It is important to take care of your skin in the area being treated. We would suggest the following:

- Avoid using any perfumes, deodorants, dressings, creams or lotions in the treatment area unless advised to do so by the radiotherapy staff.
- Wash the area gently with lukewarm water either in a bath or shower and pat dry with a soft towel. Do not rub area. Some hospitals allow you to use a gentle non-perfumed soap.
- Avoid exposing the treated area to direct sunlight for one year after treatment. When treatment is finished the skin in the treatment area will be more at risk of burning, so it is important to keep this area covered or regularly apply a sun block to the area. Avoid extreme temperatures such as heat pads, saunas, hot water bottles or cold packs while on treatment.
- Soft cotton bras or vests are more comfortable to wear while on treatment but leave them off as much as possible.
- If wearing a prosthesis, a soft lightweight one is advisable instead of your silicone prosthesis while on treatment.
- A well-balanced healthy diet with plenty of fluids can help your body to cope with the effects of treatment.
- Try not to expect too much of yourself during treatment as your energy levels will be low.
- Breast tissue on the treated side may feel firmer than before. It is important to note what is normal for you. Continue to be breast aware after treatment. For a free breast awareness information pack call the National Breast Cancer Helpline on freephone 1800 30 90 40.
- If you develop a skin reaction it should be fully
healed about 4 weeks after treatment. You will be advised by nursing staff in the radiotherapy centre on how to care for your skin.

WHAT CAN I EXPECT AFTER TREATMENT?

Although completing radiotherapy treatment is usually a relief, many people still feel quite vulnerable. It may take some time before you feel you are ‘getting back to normal’. Try not to expect too much of yourself in the early days and weeks after your treatment. You may go on feeling tired for some time, but gradually you should begin to feel better. For some, this can mean several months and sometimes up to a year.

You will be given regular follow-up appointments to monitor your progress, but if at any time you have a concern or worry, contact the radiation department doctor so that an earlier appointment can be arranged.

After radiotherapy the breast tissue on the treated side may feel firmer than before. From the point of view of breast awareness, it is important to know that this is normal and nothing to worry about.

Your skin may feel dry after radiotherapy, so using a moisturiser as recommended by the radiotherapy staff may help.

COPING WITH RADIOTHERAPY

Some people may feel quite emotionally upset, frightened or have difficulty adjusting to what is happening to them. Fear of the unknown is common so finding out as much as possible about your treatment can help you to cope better. You may find it helpful to visit the department beforehand so you know what to expect.

If you are feeling low, tired, anxious or tearful at any point during or after your treatment, remember that you are not alone and that there are people who can help you. Try to let other people know how you are feeling, particularly your family and friends, so that they can be more supportive.

It can also help to discuss your feelings or worries with your breast care nurse or specialist. Alternatively, a counsellor or psychotherapist might be suitable if you want to talk through your feelings in more depth over a period of time.

For information on available counselling services call the National Breast Cancer Helpline on freephone 1800 30 90 40.

HELP FROM ACTION BREAST CANCER

Action Breast Cancer, a programme of the Irish Cancer Society, provides breast cancer information and support and funds breast cancer research. Our services are free, confidential and accessible.

For more information call the National Breast Cancer Helpline on freephone 1800 30 90 40 or visit www.cancer.ie/action
information on treatment of breast cancer

OTHER ORGANISATIONS

Action Breast Cancer
43/45 Northumberland Road
 Ballsbridge, Dublin 4
Freefone: 1800 30 90 40
Email: abc@irishcancer.ie
Web: www.cancer.ie/action

Irish Cancer Society
43/45 Northumberland Road
Dublin 4
Freefone Helpline:
1 800 200 700
Email: helpline@irishcancer.ie

VHI Healthcare
(All correspondence should be sent to the postal address in Kilkenny)
IDA Business Park
Dublin Road, Kilkenny
CallSave: 1850 44 44 44
Monday to Friday, 8 a.m. to 6 p.m.
Saturday, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m.
Web: www.vhi.ie

Quinn Healthcare
Mill House,
Fermoy, Co. Cork,
Lo Call: 1890 89 1890
Monday to Friday, 8 a.m. to 7 p.m.
Saturday, 10 a.m. to 3.30 p.m.
Web: www.quinn-healthcare.com

Hibernian Aviva Healthcare
Postal Address:
PO Box 764, Togher, Cork.
Head Office:
One Park Place, Hatch Street,
Dublin 2
CallSave: 1850 717 717
Monday to Friday, 8 a.m. to 8 p.m.
Web: www.hibernian.ie

USEFUL WEBSITES

Irish Cancer Society
www.cancer.ie
Breast Cancer Care UK
www.breastcancercare.org.uk
Cancerbackup
www.cancerbackup.org
The Susan G. Komen Foundation
www.komen.org
Europa Donna
www.europadonnaireland.com
Manual Lymph Drainage Ireland
www.mlireland.com
Lymphoedema Ireland
www.lymphireland.ie

ABC – ACTION BREAST CANCER

Action Breast Cancer, a programme of the Irish Cancer Society, is the leading provider of breast cancer information and support in Ireland. Each year we reach over 25,000 women who are concerned about breast cancer or breast health. Our services are free and include:

- Patient care programmes – providing emotional support and practical assistance for those living with breast cancer.
- Health Promotion – providing community and workplace programmes on breast awareness and leading a healthy lifestyle.
- Advocacy – providing a voice for those affected by breast cancer in Ireland.
- Professional support – complementing the services offered by those caring for breast cancer patients.
- Research – funding vital Irish research that will have a significant impact on the diagnosis and treatment of breast cancer.

ABC is funded entirely by donations from the public. If you would like to support our work or make a donation please contact us.