



Chris O'Brien Lifehouse

Radiation Oncology Patient information

Radiation Therapy for breast cancers

Radiation therapy for breast cancer

Radiation therapy plays a vital role in treating and managing female and male breast cancer. It is commonly used in conjunction with surgery, either by removal of the lump (lumpectomy) or mastectomy. In some cases radiation therapy alone is used instead of surgery.

The treatment course received by a patient depends on a variety of factors including the type of tumour (histology), location, stage of the disease, your general health and age. Your Radiation Oncologist will advise you as to which regimen is most suitable for you, and how the treatment might affect you.

What should you bring to your planning appointment?

- A referral letter from your doctor (if not already submitted) ;
- Medicare card;
- All private scans relating to your current diagnosis; and
- A list of your current medications (including any medication allergies).

This planning session involves a Computed Tomography (CT) scan that will be used to plan your radiation therapy. This planning CT scan is taken with you in the same position required for treatment, which is different from the position used for standard CT scans. This means previous scans that you have had cannot be used for radiation therapy planning purposes.

What happens in planning?



Typically, you will be positioned lying on your back on an inclined breast board. The board is a device that is secured to the CT bed and can be adjusted in various ways to fit to your size and shape. You will be asked to raise both arms above your head. Your arms will rest in arm and wrist cups, which will help you to stay in this position for the required treatment time (usually 15-20 minutes). If you are unable to raise both arms the Radiation Therapists will adjust your position accordingly. Occasionally, you may be asked to lie on your stomach.

The Radiation Therapists will also ensure that you are lying as straight as possible on the CT scanner bed. They will do this using lasers in the CT scanner room. This process will also be repeated at each of your treatment sessions.

Your Radiation Therapists will draw some reference marks on your skin. Small pieces of wire will be placed around the breast and over any scars in the treatment region.

You will then undergo a CT scan in the treatment position. It is very important that you breathe normally and lie very still during the CT scan as any movement can affect the quality of the scans, which might mean you need to have the scans repeated. Some techniques require you to hold your breath. If this is appropriate for you, the Radiation Therapists will tell you when to hold your breath.

Once the scan is complete, your Radiation Therapists will make four - five permanent marks on your skin (tattoos). These marks are used as a reference to position you in exactly the same way for each treatment and to ensure that the correct area is receiving the radiation. The tattoos are approximately the size of a small freckle.

At the end of the planning session you will be given an appointment card with details of your first treatment (date and time).

Your Radiation Oncologist will be present during the planning session, which takes approximately 30-45 minutes.

What happens during treatment?



Your Radiation Therapist will take you to your treatment room and you will be asked to lie on the treatment bed in the same position you were in during your planning session. The lights in the room will be dimmed so that the lasers in the room can be seen clearly. These will be used to guide the Radiation Therapists in setting you up in exactly the same position every day.

Your Radiation Therapists may lightly palpate your skin to feel for palpable bones and move you slightly when they are setting you up. It is important that you follow their instructions carefully and move only when asked, as usually only millimetre adjustments will be made.

The bed and machine will then be moved into the treatment position. The machine may come close to you, but will not touch you at any point during the treatment process.

You just need to stay still and breathe normally. Some techniques require you to hold your breath. If this is appropriate for you, the Radiation Therapists will tell you when to hold your breath.

The Radiation Therapists will have to leave the treatment room to deliver the treatment. There are cameras and a microphone inside the room and your Radiation Therapists will use these to monitor you throughout the treatment. If you need your Radiation Therapists for any reason, raise your hand or call out and your Radiation Therapists will come straight in.

Although the actual treatment only takes a few minutes, the whole treatment session (from positioning to finishing treatment) may take about 10-20 minutes each day.

Treatment side effects

Side effects will vary from person to person depending on your treatment, medical circumstances and customised care plan. Many of these side effects can be managed and will gradually disappear after your treatment has finished. Please let your care team know if you develop any of these symptoms so they can be managed promptly and effectively to ensure you are more comfortable. Some of the possible side effects are listed in the table below.

To find out about complementary therapies that might assist you to manage your symptoms and side effects, contact the LivingRoom team on 02 8514 0038 or email: livingroom@lh.org.au.

Side effects	What can help?
<p>Fatigue (tiredness) – most patients experience reduced energy levels, tiredness and lack of motivation soon after starting treatment.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen to your body and rest if needed. Some people find that exercise is beneficial.
<p>Hair loss (in the treatment area – normally in the lower portion of the underarm) – hair loss normally occurs after about two weeks of treatment.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Usually temporary but may be permanent.

Side effects	What can help?
<p>Dry, red, itchy skin (in the treatment area) – skin reactions tend to appear after about two weeks of treatment and may develop even further to become itchy and tender as the treatment continues. The skin reaction is similar to that of sunburn. It may become pink and may feel warm to touch with mild discomfort.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid sun exposure. • Bathe using lukewarm water, avoid scrubbing the treatment area and use mild or moisturising soap when bathing. • Avoid irritant products containing alcohol, perfumes or additives and products containing Alpha Hydroxy Acids (AHA) as this can increase skin irritation. • Avoid wearing under-wire bras as this can rub and irritate the skin. • It is not recommended to wet shave in the treatment area, but an electric razor can be used. • Apply Sorbolene on affected area at least once daily. • Your doctor may prescribe creams/ ointments during your treatment depending on your skin reaction to help relieve severe itchiness.

There are some uncommon side effects that may occur months or years after treatment. These are called late effects and may include the following:

- Cosmetic changes that include some darkening of the skin in the treated area as well as firmness of breasts.
- Small dilated blood vessels under the skin.
- Rarely rib-fracture or development of scar tissue in the lung in the treated area.

If you have any questions or concerns, please speak to your doctor or nurses.

Weekly examinations

During your course of radiation therapy, you will be examined once a week by your Radiation Oncologist or Radiation Oncology Registrar. This will require a longer visit on that day and is essential for your treatment. Record your treatment review details below. A doctor is always available should you need to see someone outside these times.

Radiation Oncologist: _____

Radiation Oncology Registrar: _____

Clinic review time: _____

Treatment machine/phone number: _____

For more information about Radiation Oncology, please refer to our general booklet '*Explaining Radiation Therapy*'.

Useful links

The Cancer Council:	http://www.cancer.org.au/
National Breast Cancer Foundation:	http://www.nbcf.org.au/
Cancer Australia:	http://canceraustralia.gov.au/
EviQ Cancer Treatment:	https://www.eviq.org.au/
Cancer Voices NSW:	http://www.cancervoices.org.au/
Targeting Cancer:	http://www.targetingcancer.com.au/



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