

# Care After Radiation Therapy to the Breast Area



Allina Health

---

**ABBOTT  
NORTHWESTERN  
HOSPITAL**

## **Important**

If you have questions about your recovery, please call **612-863-4060**.

If you have an emergency, call 911 or go to your nearest hospital Emergency Department right away.

## Radiation Therapy

You have just finished radiation therapy. The radiation continues to work for weeks after your last treatment. Because of this, you may still feel side effects. Most side effects will improve over time.

Use the following information to help control side effects you may have.

## Skin Care

You may have skin irritation for several weeks after your last treatment.

- Wash the affected skin gently. Use a mild soap and warm water. Pat dry gently. Do not rub.
- If you are using \_\_\_\_\_, continue applying it 3 times each day until the tube is empty.
- If you are using the thick cream you received from the Radiation Oncology Department (such as Aloe Vesta<sup>®</sup>, Aquaphor<sup>®</sup> or Proshield<sup>®</sup> Plus), continue to use it 2 times each day until you no longer have any open skin.
  - Then begin using \_\_\_\_\_ and apply it 3 times each day until the tube is empty.
- When you are done using \_\_\_\_\_, use an unscented moisturizer like Lubriderm<sup>®</sup>, Eucerin<sup>®</sup> Original Moisturizing Cream or cocoa butter for up to 6 months.
- Your skin in the treatment area will be sensitive to sunlight. Wear clothing to cover the area or use sunscreen with an SPF 30 or higher. Reapply sunscreen often.

## **Fatigue**

You can expect to feel tired for about 1 month after your last treatment. Your energy level will slowly improve.

- Rest is an important part of healing. Slowly return to your regular activity level.
- Save your energy by spacing out activities that make you tired.
- Rest as needed. Limit naps during the day if you are having trouble sleeping at night.
- Get regular activity and try to walk for 30 minutes each day. Start by walking for 5 to 10 minutes at one time. Slowly build to walking for 30 minutes at one time.

## **Muscle Tightness**

Muscle tightness can happen after radiation therapy. Some people have had chest wall pain or tightness, or trouble raising an arm over the head. This can affect getting dressed or other self-care.

If you would like an exercise program for your upper body after radiation therapy, ask a member of your health care team for a set of exercises or a referral to the cancer rehabilitation program.

## **Lymphedema**

The lymphatic system removes extra fluid from body tissue into the bloodstream.

Lymphedema is the swelling of body tissue that can be caused by tissue damage or lymph node removal. Some people without cancer get lymphedema but the main cause in the U.S. is cancer or cancer treatment, such as surgery, radiation or lymph node removal.

This swelling most often occurs in your arm or leg. Only the side of your body that had damage or nodes removed would be affected.

Lymphedema can develop right away after surgery or many years later. All people who have had lymph node surgery have the potential to develop lymphedema.

### **What to watch for**

Check for early symptoms of lymphedema:

- changes to your skin
- skin feels sore or tight
- your arm or leg feels heavy
- you have a cut or burn that does not heal
- your clothing feels tighter
- your rings, shirts, pants or socks do not fit as well.

### **Whom to call**

Call your health care provider **right away** if you have:

- **rapid, severe swelling**
- redness, warmth or tenderness in the affected area
- blisters or rash
- chills
- fever
- questions or concerns for infection.

For specific information on your own medical history and risk of developing lymphedema, make an appointment to see a cancer rehabilitation specialist. (These doctors are experts in managing and treating lymphedema.)

- You do not need a referral to schedule this appointment.
- Call 612-863-2123 to make an appointment..

## **Pneumonitis**

Pneumonitis is inflammation of lung tissue. Symptoms can appear 2 to 6 months after treatment. **Call your doctor right away if you have any of these symptoms:**

- chest pain
- unexplained shortness of breath
- a dry cough that lasts longer than 10 days
- any of the symptoms above with a temperature of 100.5 F or higher.

## **Sexual Health**

Radiation treatments can affect your sexual health by causing changes in your body image, mood, energy level and sense of well-being. After treatment you may have one or more of the following:

- a change in your desire to have sex
- a change in the ability to have or maintain sexual arousal, an orgasm or an erection
- vaginal dryness (water-soluble lubricant may be helpful)
- pain during sex
- increased unpleasant sensation or numbness in the genitals.

You may have sex as long as it is comfortable. Please talk with a member of your health care team about any concerns you have about your sexual health.

## **Pain**

You may or may not have pain or discomfort. If you do, please talk with your health care team. Pain left untreated can make you feel tired, sad, anxious, depressed or irritable.

- Keep a journal about your pain and the medicines that you take.
- Rate your pain on a scale of 0 (no pain) to 10 (worst pain you can image). This will help others better understand your pain.
- Take your pain medicine as directed. Do not change your dose without talking to your doctor.
- It is easier to manage pain when it is mild instead of severe. If your pain is happening most of the day, you will need to take your medicine on a regular schedule.
- Plan ahead and take your medicine before certain activities to help you stay active.
- Constipation is a common side effect to prescription pain medicines. You can take over-the-counter laxatives or stool softeners to have bowel movements at least every 2 to 3 days.
- If your medicine makes you feel sick, ask your doctor about switching medicines or taking something to help with the nausea.
- Your pain medicine may make you feel sleepy or dizzy. This often gets better after a few days. Do not drive or do other dangerous activities while you are taking prescription pain medicines.

- Do not crush or break your pain medicine unless your pharmacist says it is OK. Long-acting pain medicines are time-released and are dangerous if crushed.
- Most prescription pain medicine refills cannot be refilled over the phone. Please plan ahead so you do not run out of your medicines. You may need to pick up a written prescription and take it your pharmacy to have it filled.
- Do not stop taking your pain medicine suddenly. Instead, decrease the amount you take slowly as the pain decreases. Talk with your doctor about how to slowly decrease these medicines.

If you are having any problems controlling your pain, please call your doctor.

## **Follow-up Care and Survivorship**

It is very important that you continue your follow-up care with your doctors. They will tell you how often you will need to have office visits, laboratory work, and imaging tests or scans.

### **Cancer Rehabilitation Program**

Your doctor can refer you to the Courage Kenny Rehabilitation Institute's Cancer Rehabilitation Program. This program offers consultations by health care providers who specialize in physical medicine and rehabilitation, and therapists who have advanced training in cancer rehabilitation. They provide care options to address the unique needs of people who have cancer such as pain and fatigue.



## **Lower your risk for cancer**

You can help lower your risk for getting cancer.

- Quit tobacco.
- Eat well-balanced meals. Eat a variety of foods from all the food groups. Try to eat at least 2 ½ cups of fruits and vegetables each day. Eat plenty of high-fiber foods such as whole grain breads and cereals.
- Get regular physical activity.
- Get to and stay at a healthy weight.
- Limit how much alcohol you drink. No more than 1 drink each day for women and no more than 2 drinks each day for men.
- Protect your skin.

Get emotional and social support to help learn how to cope with psychological stress. This can help reduce depression, anxiety and other symptoms related to treatment and having cancer.

## Resources

- Cancer.Net  
cancer.net
- National Cancer Institute  
cancer.gov
  - “Facing Forward: Life After Cancer Treatment”  
cancer.gov/publications/patient-education/  
facing-forward
- National Coalition for Cancer Survivorship  
canceradvocacy.gov
- American Cancer Society  
cancer.org
- Cancer Survivors Network  
acscsn.org
- LIVESTRONG  
livestrong.com.





Allina Health

---

**ABBOTT  
NORTHWESTERN  
HOSPITAL**

[allinahealth.org](http://allinahealth.org)