

Everything You Wish You Had Known...about radiation

Most women who've had radiation after chemo say that radiation is easier to manage. The main effects women in our support group discuss are fatigue and skin burning.

Fatigue is simply due to the work our bodies are doing coping with dying cells and healing. Naps, balanced by exercise, are the proven way of recharging. Eating a balanced diet with plenty of protein helps our body repair damaged tissues. Ditto hydrating. Unlike with chemo, we have few restrictions on what we may do and eat, but it's important to discuss taking supplements with your radiation oncologist.

The key precaution is that we must have very clean skin for each treatment so nothing interferes with the precise radiation targeting. That means no products like facial makeup or moisturizers, deodorants or other body care products in the treatment area until after the day's treatment.

Because of the risk of what we apply to the skin interfering with treatment, it's important to use only the products our radiation team specifically recommends on any area affected by treatment. If they aren't working adequately, speak up and ask for another, more potent product. Helpful friends or online forums often like to recommend their favorite products...but always run them past your team before using anything new.

Radiation both enters and leaves the body, and may affect skin in both areas. Ask your doctor specifically where this will be so that you apply needed products to *all* affected skin. Remember that if you have an intense series of "boost" treatments at the end, this may affect different skin areas.

Be gentle with irradiated skin: use mild cleansers and don't scrub. Treated areas often benefit from avoiding wearing tight-fitting clothing and by opening the skin to ventilation when possible. These and other precautions, like avoiding sun exposure to the area, should be covered in pre-treatment teaching.

The color or previous sun-burning history of your skin does not predict how your own skin will respond to radiation. Really.

Treatment involves one or more days of positioning studies to be as precise as possible in targeting the tumor area and avoiding other areas. You will probably receive a number of tiny blue dot tattoos that are used to line you up accurately for daily treatments. Tattoos feel like a sharp pinprick buzz and the tech may not warn you before doing it—so ask if you don't want to be startled.

Radiation therapy does not make you radioactive unless you have implantation of radioactive materials. Otherwise, your treatment cannot affect the people around you in any way. Clarify this with your radiation oncologist if you're not sure what kind of treatment you're having.

Treatment typically involves lying very still on a very hard surface in a particular position. If this makes you too anxious to maintain that position through the 10 or so minutes that setup and treatment takes, ask whether there is something that you can be prescribed to help with that.

Most of the daily treatment time is getting into position, half-dressed, while fully-clothed techs move around you taking measurements and talking in numbers. If you feel chilly you can ask for a blanket. Once you've had one treatment, you will have a better idea how to dress so that you only have to remove clothing from the specific area being treated.

Many treatment plans involve a different setup in the final week, but it's easy to miss this fact in the flood of information we get at the beginning. If you have any questions about your treatment, at any time, ask to speak with the radiation oncologist.

The techs may mark you up with sharpies which, with all of the creams you'll be using on the area, can result in ugly ink-staining on underwear or clothing. Wearing clothing or underwear to daily treatments that you can discard once you're done with it all is easier than trying to get those stains out again.

Once we're done with radiation treatment, our fatigue may continue to grow for a couple weeks as it takes time for our bodies to catch up. This is normal.

Radiation scarring tends to draw tissues up and may cause stiffness. Ask for a referral to a physical therapist for stretching routines if this begins to affect you. You may need to work on stretching for several years after treatment.

You will probably need to apply heavy moisturizing cream to irradiated skin at least daily for the rest of your life. Aquaphor is often recommended, but CeraVe or Cetaphil (which are often on sale at Costco) are generally-accepted alternatives.

If you are getting radiation to an area full of lymph nodes, especially if some of those nodes may have been removed in surgery, you should be given an explanation of your personal risk for lymphedema, a fluid management issue that may occur immediately or long after treatment. Even if you don't have a high risk right then, understanding what lymphedema is and how to recognize it is important. There are free monthly lectures on lymphedema at Providence (<https://providencealaska.netreturns.biz/Calendar/CalendarItemDetail.aspx?Id=3cf72aea-29c7-42b5-84b5-f808316a0e9a>), but there are also online videos you can watch at home (<https://klosetraining.com/course/online/strength-abc/lymphedema-education-session/>).