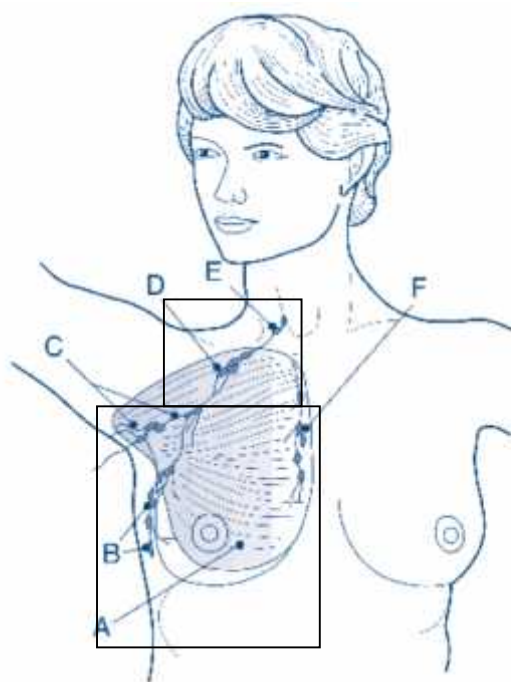


Side Effects from Radiation Treatment to the Breast and Nodal Area

Your doctor has recommended that you have a course of radiation therapy. This leaflet contains information about the treatment and its short and long term side effects. Each person reacts differently to treatment so the side effects can be different for each person. This leaflet discusses the most common.

There are two types of common side effects with radiation treatment to the breast and nodal area. There are **short term** effects which happen during or shortly after the treatment and **long term** effects which **may** happen months to years later.



Lymph node areas adjacent to breast area

- A Pectoralis major muscle
- B Axillary lymph nodes: level I
- C Axillary lymph nodes: level II
- D Axillary lymph nodes: level III
- E Supraclavicular lymph nodes
- F Internal mammary lymph nodes

Source: Cancer Society of New Zealand

The **short term** side effects that may happen are:

- Lethargy/tiredness
- Possible hair loss in the treated area
- Skin reaction
 - redness, dryness (similar to sunburn)
 - possible blistering (which may need dressings and/or pain relief)
- Chest wall / breast pain

While on treatment you will be seen weekly by your doctor, who will help you to manage these side effects if they happen.

The **long term** side effects that may happen are:

- Skin Changes - Your skin in the treatment area may become darker or lighter than it used to be
 - thinning of the skin
 - increase in sensitivity to the sun (always use protection)
- Breast Changes - fullness / firmness
 - the appearance of your breast may change compared to the untreated side
- Lung Changes - fibrosis (thickening or scarring)
- Discomfort or pain in your chest wall on the treated side
- Swelling of your arm (oedema) on the treated side
- Damage to the brachial plexus (a bundle of nerves that start in your neck) which may lead to tingling or weakness in the muscles of the arm or hand on the treated side
- If you are treated on the left side, an increased risk of problems with your heart
- It is very rare but radiation therapy can cause a second cancer

If you have any concerns about the side effects of treatment, please discuss this with your doctor.

What happens now?

Radiation treatment is given daily (Monday - Friday) for approximately 4-7 weeks. Before your course of radiation treatment can start you will need to attend the Oncology Department for the planning of your treatment. This appointment will be sent to you in the mail.

More information about radiation treatment and its side effects can be found in your information folder or through The Cancer Society. You can contact them on 0800 226237, visit their website (www.cancernz.org.nz) or visit them on the ground floor of the Oncology Department.

This space has been left blank so that you can make notes or write down any questions that you may have:

Use of Mepitel[®] Film with Radiation Therapy

This information sheet provides an overview about the use of Mepitel[®] Film. Your health care team has suggested that its use may help provide comfort and protect your skin during your treatment.

Why has Mepitel[®] Film been suggested for you?

Mepitel[®] Film is a gentle, transparent, breathable film dressing for skin protection. Studies indicate that it can reduce the severity of short-term radiation-induced skin reactions in some patients. It protects the skin by:

- Providing a flexible, transparent covering to protect the skin from friction and damage
- Maintaining a moist environment and allowing moisture to pass through it from the skin
- Conforming to surface irregularities and body contours specific to you.

Who will get Mepitel Film[®] as part of their radiation treatment?

Currently the film dressing is only funded for certain patients. If you are not eligible, you may choose to provide it for yourself by purchasing it directly from the supplier. Please ask one of the treatment team (radiation therapist, nurse, doctor) for the supplier's contact details.

When, and for how long, would it be used?

The film dressing will be applied to the treated area of your skin during your first week of treatment. It may remain in place for several weeks without the need for change, although it will be reviewed each day you attend for your treatment.

What can you do before the film dressing is applied?

Avoid the use of moisturisers, deodorants, perfumes, or talcum powder in the treatment area. These products may affect the ability of the film dressing to closely adhere to your skin.

If the area under your arm is in the treatment field we ask that you trim your under-arm hair as close to the skin surface as possible. This is to ensure that the film dressing conforms to your skin as closely as possible.

- **Do not shave** your armpit during treatment as this can cause irritation
- **Do not remove** the dressing yourself

What should you do, or expect to happen, during your treatment?

- It is important you **leave the film dressing in place during the weekend** when you are not being treated as this allows the skin to rest and recover.
- Each day, one of the treatment team will check your skin and any other side effects.
- The dressing will be trimmed and patched as necessary if it pulls away from the skin
- If the film dressing pulls away overnight or during the weekend, let one of the treatment team know **when you visit for your next appointment.**
- You may carefully wash, with unscented soap and water, in the treatment area. Avoid immersing your film dressing by bathing or spraying it directly under the shower. Gently pat your skin dry when you have finished.
- Perfumed soaps may irritate the skin, so these should be avoided while on treatment.

What can you do if your skin feels hot or uncomfortable underneath your film dressing during your treatment?

Place a moist face cloth or small towel in a medium-sized Snap-lock bag, seal it, and keep it in your fridge. Place the cool bag against your skin or areas covered with film for 10 – 15 minutes to relieve any discomfort. When you have finished, put the bag back in your fridge to use again.

What will happen if your skin breaks down during your treatment?

If a wound develops under the film towards the end of your treatment, it may be removed and a different dressing applied each day.

What will happen when your treatment is finished?

The effect that radiation has on your skin may continue for about two weeks after your treatment has finished. When your treatment finishes the film dressing will be left in place. Your nurse will arrange follow-up to review and assess your skin, and provide care and advice as necessary. In some cases, a referral may be made to community-based nurses for on-going skin care or wound management.

Notes: