

## Arden Cancer Centre

# Radiotherapy Information for Patients Undergoing Treatment to the Breast, Chest Wall and / or Lymph Nodes

### What is Radiotherapy?

Radiotherapy is the use of high-energy radiation to kill cancer cells in the area being treated. Radiotherapy can also damage normal cells in the treatment area which can cause some side effects. However, radiotherapy is planned very carefully to shield as much healthy tissue as possible in order to reduce these side effects. The tissues usually heal, with an improvement in side effects and symptoms over time.

Radiotherapy is delivered by highly trained staff called Therapy Radiographers on machines called Linear Accelerators.

Both male and female staff will treat you. We are a teaching hospital and have student radiographers on placement in radiotherapy who are supervised by trained staff.

For more information about radiotherapy and to watch our department video go to:

<https://www.uhcw.nhs.uk/our-services-and-people/our-departments/radiotherapy/>

### Consent forms

Before you undergo this procedure you will be required to sign a consent form which indicates that your doctor has explained the treatment procedure and any possible side effects to you and that you agree to go ahead with treatment.



## Patient Information

### **Pacemakers**

**If you have a pacemaker, or implantable defibrillator, please mention this to both your doctor and the radiographers before your first appointment as the performance of your device can be changed by the treatment and it may need testing before and after treatment.**

### **Pregnancy**

If you are, or become, pregnant at any time before or during your treatment it is important to inform a member of staff as soon as possible. There is a significant risk to an unborn baby from radiotherapy.

For advice on contraception please speak to your consultant or GP.

### **Treatment Planning**

In order to treat you accurately and reduce side effects, your radiotherapy, treatment must be carefully planned. This will involve having a CT scan in the radiotherapy department and then a gap of three to four weeks before your treatment starts, during which time doctors, physics staff and radiographers are preparing your treatment

You will need to remove your clothing down to your waist for the CT planning scan and subsequent treatments. Gowns are available if you need one. We suggest that some patients might like to wear a small crop top which can then be pulled down when required. Please ask if you are unsure. You will be asked to lie on the couch on a special board with supports for your head and arms. Your head and shoulders will be slightly raised and your arms up. If you have any difficulties lying with your arms up it might be helpful to take painkillers before you come. Please let the radiographers know if you are uncomfortable or need assistance.

### **Skin marks**

At the scan felt tip pen marks will be put onto your skin; these reference marks are used to ensure you are lying in the same position during treatment, with your permission, we can put tiny permanent dots of dye just beneath the skin which will not wash off called tattoos. If we are unable to do this you will need to keep felt tip pen marks on your skin for all of your treatment.

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### **Deep Inspiration Breath Hold Treatment (DIBH)**

Deep inspiration breath hold (DIBH) is sometimes used when treating patients who have left sided breast cancer. It involves taking a deep breath in and holding your breath for a short period of time as radiotherapy treatment is given. This can help to reduce the amount of radiation received by the heart for some patients having left breast radiotherapy.

If DIBH radiotherapy could be of benefit to you, your consultant will have discussed it with you before attending for the CT planning scan. However, the final decision about using DIBH will be made when you have your planning CT scan. Due to individual differences in shape, size, internal anatomy and other factors, DIBH may not be beneficial to you, in which case you will receive standard radiotherapy. There is a separate information sheet about DIBH radiotherapy which will be given to you if appropriate.

### **Treatment**

The radiographers will deliver the treatment as prescribed by your consultant. To do this they will ask you to remove any clothing down to your waist. You may wear a crop top in the room but will need to lower it down when on the treatment couch. You will be positioned on the treatment couch in the same way as when your treatment was planned.

The radiographers will dim the lights and use laser lights to line up your tattoos. When you and the machine are in the correct position, the radiographers leave the room to switch the machine on. You will need to lie quite still but can breathe normally, unless you are having DIBH treatment in which case you will already have been given instructions about breathing. The treatment machine will move around you during the treatment, but nothing will touch you. You will not feel anything during the treatment but the machine will make a buzzing noise.

The treatment times are very short, images are taken beforehand to check that the treatment is correct before it is given. The radiographers watch you all the time on a monitor and will turn the machine off and enter the room if you move or call for assistance. Most people will be in the treatment room for about 15-20 minutes, but sometimes it can take a little longer.

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Once the machine has switched off there is no radiation present; you will not be radioactive and are safe to be near pregnant women and children.

Your radiotherapy doctor will discuss with you the total number of treatments that you need and how often you will need to attend the department.

### **Side effects of radiotherapy**

Treatment is painless but can cause some side effects. The side effects of radiotherapy treatment to the breast or chest wall are related to the type of breast surgery that you may have had, and the precise area that you are having treated. Most side effects will last for 2-4 weeks after radiotherapy has finished. They can be thought of as early (acute) and late (chronic) effects.

### **Early side effects**

These effects can occur during your treatment and for a short while afterwards.

### **Effects on the skin**

Radiotherapy can cause a skin reaction similar to exposure to the sun in the area treated. Towards the end of treatment, and for a week or two after, the skin may become more red and dry or appear darker, particularly under the breast and arm. Rarely moist patches may develop.

We advise that you:

- Wash treated area daily with your usual soap or shower gel and pat your skin dry with a soft towel.
- Apply your usual skin moisturiser on the treatment area two or three times a day. Gently smooth it onto your skin until it is absorbed. Do not apply just before your treatment.
- If you need to, ask your GP to prescribe a suitable skin moisturiser, otherwise discuss this with your treatment radiographers at the start of your radiotherapy. They may be able to give you a sample moisturiser to try.
- Continue to use deodorants if desired, unless they are found to irritate the skin or the skin is broken.

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- Wear loose-fitting clothing next to the skin (cotton is a good natural fibre).
- Avoid any perfumes, aftershaves, make-up, hair dye or other creams in the treated area.
- Avoid the use of sun lamps, spray tans or skin colouring lotions.
- Avoid using hot water bottles or ice packs in the treatment area.
- Keep the treated area out of the sun during treatment and care should be taken in the future by using a high factor sun cream – factor 30 or above.
- Avoid shaving in the area being treated (if you have to shave then use an electric razor for dry shaving only. When the skin becomes visibly red, stop shaving). No wet shaving, hair removal creams, lasers or wax should be used.
- Avoid using sticky tape in the treatment area such as Elastoplast or Micropore.
- Drink plenty of fluids.

## Swimming

You may continue to swim if your skin is not blistered or peeling, providing that you wash the treatment area before and afterwards and apply moisturiser. Care should be taken as chlorinated water can have a drying effect on the skin. Do not swim if you have an infection or your skin is irritated.

## Effects on the breast

Radiotherapy can cause the area being treated to swell slightly and feel tender; this may be more noticeable towards the end of treatment and for a few weeks after. Try to find clothing that is comfortable, such as bra's without wires.

Some patients complain of short sharp stabbing pains in the breast, particularly around their scar. Do take painkillers if required.

## Fatigue

Fatigue can be a common side effect of radiotherapy and can last for some months. If you feel tired you may need to rest, but evidence has shown

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that gentle exercise can help. More information on this is available from Macmillan Cancer Support.

### **Hair loss**

Radiotherapy only results in temporary hair loss to the area being treated. Therefore you may lose your underarm hair on the side being treated. Men may also lose some chest hair. When it grows back it may be thinner or patchy.

### **Effects on the lungs**

Some women may develop symptoms such as breathlessness, chest pain or dry cough. When this occurs it is usually about 4 weeks after the start of radiotherapy and can last up to 3 months.

### **Late side effects**

The following late effects may occur months to years after completing radiotherapy:

- Some patients notice discomfort in the breast; this should slowly subside but occasionally persists;
- Occasionally patients find that their breast feels firmer after treatment and there may be some change in breast size;
- If you had breast reconstruction using an implant before radiotherapy, you may find it hardens and needs to be replaced;
- Your skin in the area treated will always be more sensitive to the sun, so use at least factor 30 sun block;
- Occasionally small blood vessels can become visible on the skin in the treatment area, particularly if a wax pad (bolus) was put onto your skin during treatment. This is called telangiectasia and is permanent. These tiny blood vessels cause threadlike red lines or patterns on the skin. These patterns are sometimes known as “spider veins” because of their fine and web-like appearance.
- Your skin in the area treated may remain slightly darker in colour;
- Skin may feel drier in the area that was treated. You may continue to use a moisturising cream if you wish;
- You may experience some difficulty with moving your arm or shoulder, this can also be due to the surgery you have had. Rarely you may experience some pain, tingling, weakness of the shoulder, arm, hand or

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wrist. It may be helpful to see a physiotherapist, please speak to your doctor or breast care nurse about this

- Very rarely the ribs may be more fragile after radiotherapy which could lead to a higher risk of fracture following trauma in years to come;
- Lymphoedema (swelling of the arm or hand), nerve pain, tingling and weakness in the arm can occur. The chances of this happening are 5% when radiotherapy is given to the breast or chest wall but increases to 20% when the lymph nodes above the collarbone are also treated. If lymphoedema is likely to be a problem your consultant will discuss it with you. There are several treatments available that can help these symptoms;
- Where treatment is given to the lymph node areas in the neck above the collar bone, there may be a 1-2% risk of a stroke.
- Treatment is very carefully planned to avoid treating an unnecessary amount of lung. Breathlessness is therefore a very unusual late effect occurring in 1% of patients;
- When radiotherapy is given for left sided breast cancer there is a very small risk of some damage to the heart muscle and blood vessels around the heart which could result in breathlessness, tiredness and dizzy spells. However, this is very rare.
- There is a small risk (1-2% per 10 years after treatment) of developing a second cancer due to radiotherapy.

Please discuss any new symptoms that you experience after your treatment with your consultant in the follow up clinic, or with your GP.

If you are concerned about the late effects of radiotherapy treatment, or would like more information, please speak to your consultant, your breast nurse or the Macmillan Radiotherapy Specialist on 024 7696 7290.

There is a Macmillan booklet "Managing the late effects of breast cancer treatment".

## Treatment Reviews

At some point during your treatment you may be booked in for a 'treatment review', this will be with a radiographer or breast care nurse unless there is a medical problem, in which case you will see a doctor. The aim of this review is to discuss any side effects that you may be experiencing as a result of your treatment, and any side effects that may occur as the treatment continues.

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It is not usually possible to give you any information on how effective the treatment has been so far at these review sessions for two reasons:-

- Firstly, although we take pictures of the treatment area during your radiotherapy, they are to check the position of the treatment field and are not detailed enough to show us how well the treatment is working;
- Secondly, there is a delay in the way that radiotherapy works, so the effects of treatment can't be assessed until a number of weeks, after the treatment has finished.

## After Treatment

The side effects from the treatment will continue for several weeks after the treatment course has been completed. Therefore you will need to continue looking after your skin, as described previously, for 3-4 weeks after the completion of treatment. After finishing your treatment you will receive an appointment to see your consultant around 6 to 12 weeks later.

If you have any queries or concerns once your treatment has finished you can contact the Macmillan Radiotherapy Specialist on 024 7696 7290 or your Breast Care Nurse at your local hospital.

## Where is the Arden Centre?

The Arden Centre is part of University Hospital Coventry. The entrance to the Arden Centre is situated to the left of the main hospital entrance. Please visit the University Hospital web site for up to date maps and directions: [www.uhcv.nhs.uk](http://www.uhcv.nhs.uk)

## How shall I travel?

### By car

You can drive whilst having radiotherapy treatment unless you have been advised not to for another reason.

Sat Nav postcode: CV2 2DX

At busy times it can be very difficult to park so please allow extra time. There are several visitor car parks across the site and there are drop-off points by the Arden Centre and near the main entrance, which allow for 10

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minutes of free parking. Disabled car parking facilities are located near the main entrance. Charges apply in all car parks and Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) is live across all visitor car parks, this means that our car parks no longer issue tickets at barriers and instead read your number plate as you enter. Payment is then required at one of the payment machines before exiting the car park and can be made using cash, card or contactless. Payment can also be made by telephone or online before midnight, see the trust website for details.

**However, you are entitled to free parking whilst on radiotherapy treatment, you will need to give your registration number to the Arden Centre receptionist on arrival, if you don't know your registration number we suggest you make a note of it or take a photo of the number plate. Please note that free parking does not include clinic appointments, complementary therapy and counselling appointments, all of which must be paid for.**

## Public Transport

Many bus routes include the hospital with buses driving onto the site, stopping close to the main entrance. For more information about bus services to University Hospital see the transport for West Midlands website: <https://www.tfwm.org.uk/>

## Hospital Transport

Hospital transport is available where there is a medical need, not for social or financial reasons.

If you receive Disability Living Allowance Mobility Component or have a vehicle under the mobility scheme you may not be entitled to access hospital transport.

If you need hospital transport and feel that you are eligible you will need to book it yourself, giving 48 hours notice. You will need to telephone:-

### **West Midlands Ambulance Service**

01926 310312 (for bookings only)

01926 488410 (for queries on day of travel only)

**Thames Ambulance Service (Leicestershire) 0345 241 3012**

## Patient Information

In most cases you will not be able to bring anyone with you. Whilst your transport will be booked to get you to the hospital for your appointment time this cannot be guaranteed but you will be treated as soon as possible after you arrive. Due to the demand on the hospital transport service patients will often be waiting at the Arden Centre to be taken home for some considerable time. We advise that, where possible, patients make their own travel arrangements. If you have to rely on the hospital transport service, please make sure that you bring food, drinks and any medication that you may need for the day with you. There is a refreshment kiosk available to buy snacks and drinks which is open from 10.00am-4.00pm.

### **Transport Schemes**

There are transport schemes operating in some areas. These schemes will charge a mileage rate which varies. For more information please ask to speak to the Macmillan Radiotherapy Specialist.

### **Travel costs**

The NHS Hospital Travel Cost Scheme enables people in receipt of certain benefits or who are on a low income to claim back some of their travel costs. Please ask to speak to the Macmillan Radiotherapy Specialist for more information.

### **Prescriptions**

All cancer patients are entitled to free prescriptions. If you haven't already got an exemption card please ask a member of staff for an application form.

### **Appointments**

The department is usually open from 9.00am – 5.00pm Monday to Friday and is closed at weekends and on public holidays. On the first day of treatment you will be given a written appointment schedule. Please check these dates and notify your treatment radiographers if you need to change any dates or times as soon as possible.

Every effort will be made to give you times that you prefer, but with a heavy workload this cannot be guaranteed.

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Radiotherapy treatment machines are very complex; they are maintained by a team of in house physicists and technicians. Delays in treatment can happen due to machine breakdowns and servicing.

There may be breaks in treatment due to public holidays and machine maintenance. However, some patients may be asked to come in for treatment on these days, when a different treatment machine could be used.

It is not advisable for you to miss any other appointments, but if it is unavoidable please talk to the radiographers who are treating you.

It is important that we have a contact telephone number for you as we often have to telephone patients at short notice about appointments or with other information. If your telephone is set to bar incoming calls from withheld numbers, please give us an alternative telephone number.

## Counselling

There is a counselling service available at the Arden Centre, for more information speak to your specialist nurse, doctor or radiographer, or telephone 024 7696 7478.

## **Complementary therapy – may be unavailable due to Covid 19 restrictions**

Aromatherapy, reiki, massage, reflexology and yoga are available to oncology patients. Therapists are volunteers and provide their services to patients free of charge. Yoga sessions are available once a month.

Complementary is by appointment only. Please ask a member of staff, or telephone 024 7696 7290.

The Macmillan Radiotherapy Specialist is available in the department to help you with any queries concerning the above. Please ask at the reception desk.

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### Information and Support

**Cancer Information Centre** 024 7696 6052

We can offer free support, practical advice and information to anyone affected by cancer. No appointments are required and an answering machine facility is available. Open Monday to Friday 9.00am to 4.00pm, the Centre is located on the ground floor of the main entrance.

### Useful telephone numbers and websites:

**Arden Cancer Centre:** 024 7696 7272

Monday to Friday 9.00 am – 5.00 pm

**Oncology Ward 35:** 024 7696 5525 or 024 7696 5528 or 024 7696 5531  
(24 hour emergency advice only please)

**Radiotherapy information and advice:** 024 7696 7290

Macmillan Radiotherapy Specialists

Monday – Friday 9am – 5pm

**NHS advice** - use the 111 service if help is needed urgently but it is not an emergency.

**Macmillan Cancer Support:** 0808 808 0000

[www.macmillan.org.uk](http://www.macmillan.org.uk)

**Breast Cancer Care:** 0808 800 6000

[www.breastcancercare.org.uk](http://www.breastcancercare.org.uk)

### Patient Satisfaction

We hope that you have found this booklet helpful. We welcome your comments on the care and service that you have received within the Arden Cancer Centre.

## Patient Information

We ask that specific complaints be directed to a member of staff so that in line with University Hospitals Coventry and Warwickshire NHS Trust complaints policy, they can be dealt with, quickly and efficiently.

## Further Information

If you need help, information or advice, either during, or at any time after your course of treatment has finished, please telephone: 024 7696 7290, Monday to Friday 9.00am to 5.00pm and speak to the Macmillan Radiotherapy Specialist.

Written by Julia Biggs & Alison Crichton  
(Macmillan Radiotherapy Specialists)

With help and advice from the Medical Staff of the Arden Cancer Centre, University Hospitals Coventry and Warwickshire NHS Trust, Coventry CV2 2DX.

The Trust has access to interpreting and translation services. If you need this information in another language or format, we will do our best to meet your needs. Please contact 024 7696 7272.

This Trust operates a smoke free policy. Please respect other patients and staff and refrain from smoking whilst visiting the hospital. Thank you. For help to stop smoking call the National smoke free Helpline on 0300 123 1044 or contact the hospital's stop smoking service 02476 964760

To give feedback on this leaflet please email [feedback@uhcw.nhs.uk](mailto:feedback@uhcw.nhs.uk)

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