

## 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, usually x-rays, to kill cancer cells in the area being treated. Radiotherapy can damage normal cells in the treatment area too but they can usually repair themselves, whereas cancer cells can't. The damage to normal cells results in some side effects but radiotherapy is planned very carefully to avoid treating as much healthy tissue as possible in order to reduce these side effects.

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.

### 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.

### Pacemakers

**If you have a pacemaker please mention this to both your doctor and also the radiographers, before your first 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.



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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.

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 you 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.

### Skin marks

At the scan felt tip pen marks will be put onto your skin; these reference marks are used to identify the area that will be treated but, 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.

### 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

*At the time of writing this information the DIBH technique has been suspended due the increased risks relating to COVID-19 associated with deep inspiration and expiration. This will be reviewed and assessed on a regular basis.*

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### **Treatment**

The radiographers will deliver the treatment as prescribed by your consultant. To do this they will ask you to remove any clothing from the treatment area. You may wear the crop top in the room but will need to take it down when on the treatment couch. It is essential to make sure treatment is given safely and accurately, and you will be positioned on the treatment couch in the same way as when your treatment was planned.

The radiographers will line you up with the machine by dimming the room lights and using laser lights and a bright light from the machine. The machine may move around you during this process but in most cases will not touch you.

When you and the machine are in the correct position, the radiographers will 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 instruction about breathing. You will not feel anything during the treatment but the machine will make a buzzing noise. The treatment times are very short, but it will take a little time before treatment can start whilst the radiographers take images and check the treatment. Most people will be in the treatment room for about 15-20 minutes, but sometimes it can take a little longer. The radiographers will be watching you throughout on closed circuit television cameras and can hear you on an intercom. They can switch the machine off and enter the room if you move or call them.

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.

### **Radiotherapy boosts / Phase 2**

Some patients will have a boost or 'Phase 2' treatment, which is usually 5 extra treatments at the end of the main radiotherapy treatment to a smaller area where the tumour was. Your doctor will explain this to you. This treatment is usually very similar to 'Phase 1'.

Occasionally electrons may be used for the 'Phase 2'. To do this a small applicator is attached to the machine, which will come to rest onto your skin. You will be in the same position as phase 1.

### **Side effects of treatment**

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. They can be thought of as early (acute), intermediate and late (chronic) effects.

### **Early side effects**

These effects occur during your treatment and for a few weeks after treatment has finished.

### **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.
- 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

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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 breast 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 a bra that is comfortable and supportive, bra's without wires are usually more comfortable.

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

### Fatigue

Fatigue can be a common effect of radiotherapy. If you feel tired you may need to rest, but evidence has shown 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. When it grows back it may be thinner or patchy.

### Short-term side effects

Around 1 in 50 women will develop symptoms such as breathlessness, chest pain or dry cough. When this occurs it is usually about 6 weeks after the start of radiotherapy and can last up to 3 months.

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### Late side effects

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

- Some women notice discomfort in the breast; this should gradually subside but occasionally persists;
- Occasionally women 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. 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 brittle 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 when radiotherapy is given after the removal of some of the lymph nodes under the arm. 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;

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- 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, fatigue and dizzy spells. However, this is very rare;
- There is a small risk (1-2% per 10 years following treatment) of developing a second cancer due to radiotherapy.

If you are concerned about any of these side effects, please ask to speak to your consultant or the Macmillan Radiotherapy Specialist.

There are some information booklets produced by Macmillan Cancer Support you might find helpful:

- Understanding Radiotherapy
- 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.

### **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 approximately 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.

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### **Where is the Arden Centre?**

The Arden Centre is situated in the west wing of University Hospital Coventry. 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 near the main entrance and the Women's and Children's entrance which allow for 10 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 call the traveline on: 0870 608 2608 or visit [www.networkwestmidlands.com](http://www.networkwestmidlands.com)

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### **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**

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 ensure 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.

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### **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.

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

Breaks in treatment due to public holidays and machine maintenance do not affect most people's treatment. 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.

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

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**

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

The counselling and complementary services are 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

#### **Macmillan 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** – Monday to Friday 9.00 am – 5.00 pm

For queries concerning appointments, parking and ambulance transport  
Radiotherapy reception: 024 7696 7272

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

#### **Cancer and 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.

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

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### 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 Alison Crichton or Julia Biggs on 024 7696 7290.

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

#### Document History

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